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JULY

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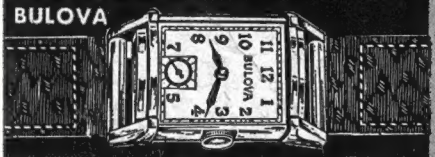

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AUGUST ISSUE OUT JULY 11!


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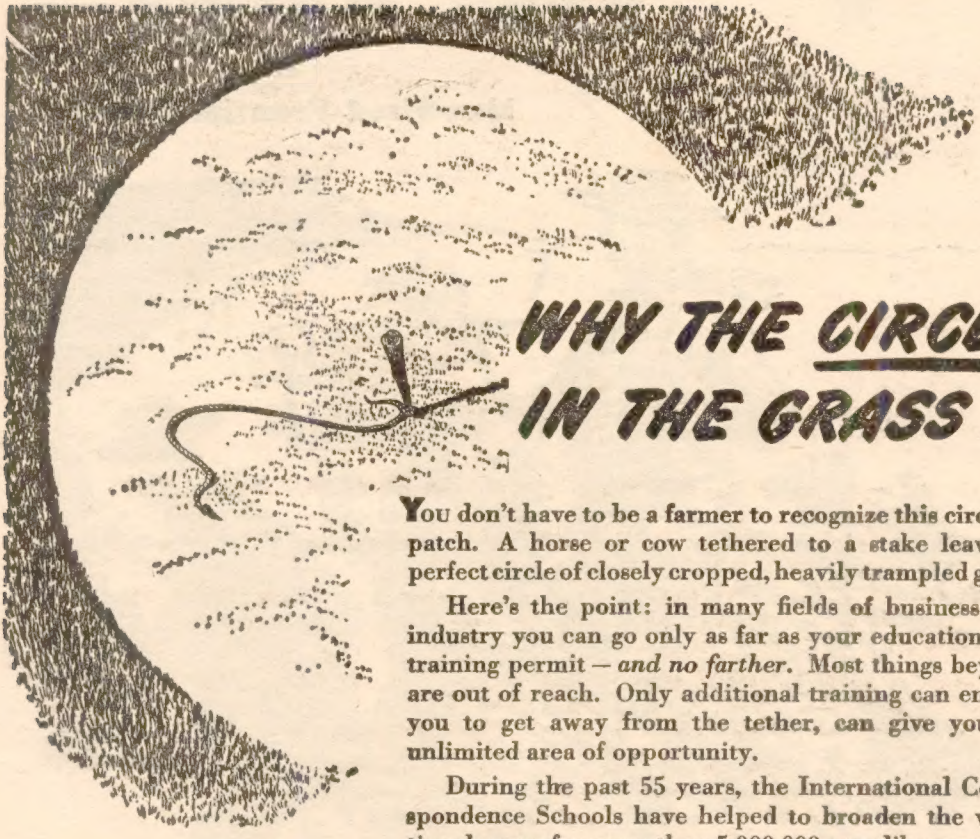

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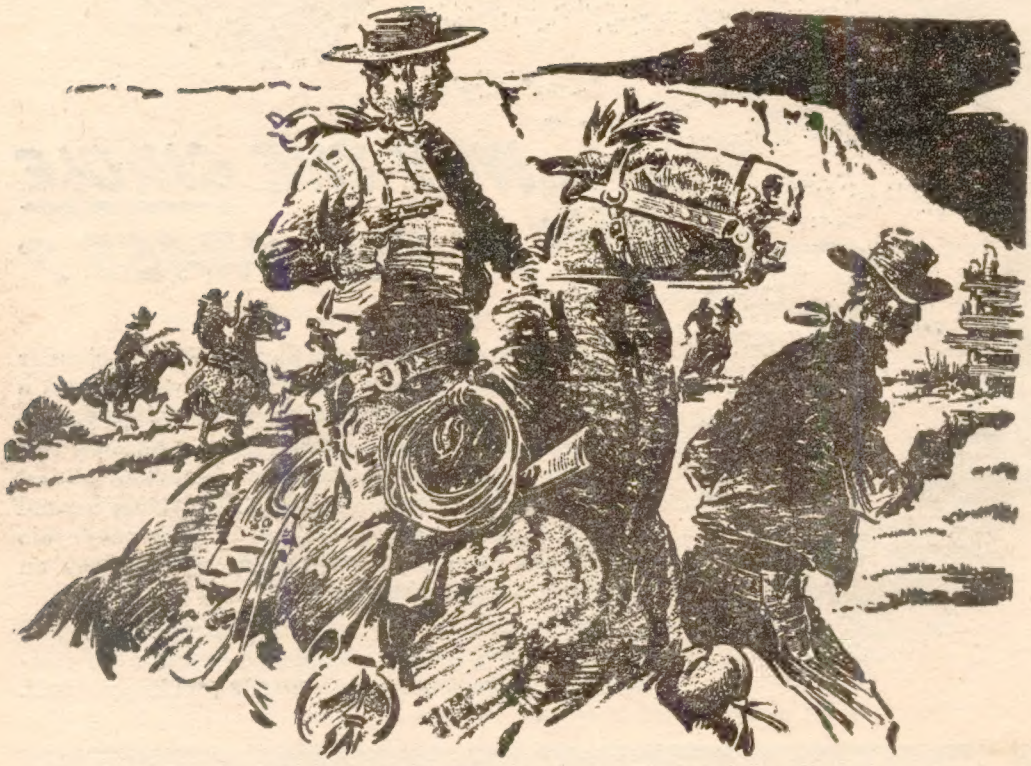


**All the way up the trail Hank Peck had told Riley Burnett about the Valley of the Little Muddy. There the grass brushed your stirrups and the water wasn't actually muddy at all. You put up a big crop of wild hay to feed through the long winter and you could cut hay in the coulees. It was a cowman's Paradise — if he had enough fighting guts to stick. And it was red, bloody hell for runaway yellow-bellies!**

## CHAPTER ONE

### Trail's End for the Skillet

RILEY BURNETT and old Hank Peck pointed the trail herd off the high wide bench and down the easy slope into the valley where giant cottonwoods and willow brush marked the course of the Muddy River.

The valley, with its green feed and good water, was a cowman's dream of Paradise come true. This was the end of the long, dangerous trail from Texas to Montana. The end of the trail and the job well done. Young Burnett had every reason to be proud because he was, at that time, the youngest trail boss to fetch a drive out of Texas. It was a while before he could get the ache out of his throat and trust his

# If You Fight for It! ★

## By Walt Coburn

Port and Red quit their saddles and came on. They had guts.

voice. That was the black Irish in his blood. Emotion choked him, softened his hard gray eyes. Ashamed of that emotion, he was careful to make his voice sound casual when he called to old Peck who had, Riley admitted, actually done the job for him.

"Shore purty, Hank. This it?"

"This is her, son!" Peck shouted across the strung-out cattle. "This is the Valley of the Little Muddy."

Burnett eased his weight to his left stirrup. He looked good on a horse, though he didn't know it. He always felt more like a man when he was mounted. He was almost short-statured: five feet seven. His husky shoulders wedged down to a lean, flat belly and slim flanks. Afoot they were apt to call him Shorty and he'd never go for that Shorty nickname. His was a square-cornered mouth that was generous and sensitive. He had the coal black hair of the Rileys. His mother had been a Riley.

His father had been Texas Ranger Captain Floyd Burnett, who had died with his boots on and his gun smoking in the Texas Wire Cutters' War. Burnett had left his motherless son with a little cow outfit and grizzled Hank Peck to depend on in a tight.

"You git Riley outa Texas, Hank," Captain Burnett had told the grizzled cowhand, "when I'm gone. Git him out before the boy gits the notion to pick 'er up where I left off. You bin up the trail. You're always talkin' about Montana Territory. When the sign is right, git him to sell out and travel yonderly. It's big new country. A young cowman should do good up there in that Little Muddy Valley you tell about."

All the way up the trail Peck had told Riley Burnett about the Valley of the Little Muddy; where grass brushed your stirrups and the water wasn't actually muddy at all, only in the early Spring when the ice broke up and the river overflowed her banks. When the river went down again the water cleared and it was good water. You put up a big crop of wild hay to feed through the long winter and you could cut hay in the coulees. It was cow country. Texas longhorns put on two-three hundred pounds more than ever they would down yonder in the Texas Panhandle. And Hank Peck had described it so often around the campfire and on night guard, and with such accuracy for detail, that Riley recognized the Little Muddy the minute he laid eyes on it.

Homely, honest Hank Peck was one of the best cowhands that ever lived. He squandered his hard-earned cowpuncher wages on whiskey and stud hoss poker; he'd give his last dollar away. Peck had punched cows longer than he could remember. He had ramrodded some of the biggest outfits in Texas. He had taken half a dozen trail herds north. Never had he hankered for his own iron, an outfit he could call his own. He claimed its responsibilities would tie him down and he wanted to be free till he died.

THIS moment, moving down toward the Little Muddy, Peck felt, was the greatest of his reckless life. To be giving away a whole river valley—a cowman's kingdom—to the son of his lifelong friend made Peck feel like God. This fulfilled the promise he had made long ago to Cap Burnett.

"She's all yourn, Riley," he called. "All yourn fer the takin' an' the claimin'."

Across the cattle and the dust haze scuffed up by the hoofs of the trail herd in the Burnett Skillet brand, young Riley Burnett's eyes were bright blue lights. His voice was husky.

"It's even purtier, Hank, than how you told it. It makes a feller want to pray up to Godamighty. . . ."

"That's right, son. And when a man kin pray he's big enough to deserve what's spread out down yonder. Don't never feel ashamed of ary prayers your mother taught you, boy. Molly Riley was the finest girl ever lived." Hank Peck had let something of a secret slip. He had loved the woman.

No secret, so far as Riley Burnett was concerned. He had known for a long time that Hank had backed off to let Cap Burnett marry the only girl he had ever loved. And he had done it with a splendid and generous heart that had never known jealousy or bitterness. Burnett had had something to offer a bride: a ranch of his own and a captain's commission in the Rangers. Peck had lacked even the few dollars necessary to pay a sky pilot parson. Even if he did have a chance to marry the woman.

But even as Peck and Burnett sat their horses and claimed the Valley of the Little Muddy as far as their sight could reach, they saw something that chilled their hearts.

Six riders were coming up out of the valley. For the first time Peck and Burnett cleared their vision of dreams and down yonder along the river they sighted the log buildings, pole corrals and haystacks where somebody had located already.

Three years before, when Hank Peck had ridden through the valley, it had been free and wide open.

This was a gut-shot. The warmth was gone from the late afternoon sun. A chill crept into the guts of old Hank Peck, leaving him sick inside like he'd been poisoned. . . .

The two cowpunchers on the swing behind the point of the trail herd now came riding up. They were both tough hands. Whenever Peck took a drive through country infested by rustlers, he hand-picked his crew for their cowhand ability and fighting qualities. These two cowpunchers had their share of toughness.

Port Gardner was big; when drinking he was mean as hell. Even cold sober he was a man to let alone. He had a splayed, broken nose. His eyes were black under beetling brows and his hair was straight and coarse as a horse's mane. Swarthy, he had the look of a half-breed. but he was a white man. He had been asked to turn in the Texas Ranger commission he had held for two years because the ugly scrapes he kept getting into were against the strict rules and regulations. Gardner was tough and he wanted it known.

Gardner's pardner was just as hard to handle in a ruckus. Red Nally was tall, slim and quick-moving. He was stacked

like a long, rawhide buggy whip. His big nose jutted out above a thin-lipped mouth and his eyes were green. His hair, and the whiskers he'd let grow to an unkept bush, were red. His skin sunburned and peeled and his big nose had a raw beefy look like it had been skinned. He'd let his beard grow to protect his skin from sunburn. He had a habit of taking the black axle grease from the hubs of the chuck or bed wagon and he'd smear the black wagon-dope on his peeled nose. Red Nally had a mean streak that found its outlet in painful practical jokes. On night guard he sang ribald songs to the bedded cattle. His talk was tainted. Red Nally was not a man you could trust around a cow outfit or decent women. But in a tight he was hell cut loose and a good man to take along up the cattle trail.

Both Port Gardner and Red Nally were top cowhands anywhere you put 'em. And they were side-pardners. They distrusted and disliked each other. But they recognized and respected in each other the same tough fighting qualities and the same traits that might, if fate so decided, turn them into outlaws. But if ever Gardner and Nally turned bad, they'd play for high stakes and they'd go the limit. No penny ante game would tempt that pair. They had larceny in their blood, they told each other, but it wasn't petty.

Gardner and Nally had heard Peck talk about the valley. Now Port rode up and halted alongside Peck while Nally pulled up near Burnett.

"So that's the country," Nally grinned, "that Peck's takin' away from the Injuns! By the eternal hot clinkers of hell I can't blame the ol' son fer braggin' it up till a man's ears gits clogged."

Then Red's bloodshot eyes sighted the riders below. His cracked lips twisted and his mirthless laugh cut Riley like a whip.

GARDNER heard the laugh, turned sideways in his saddle and slipped the stock of the saddle carbine he always packed. His teeth were bared.

"We dealt them damn nesters some hell, Red, back yonder in Texas when we bought into that Wire Cutters' War. Me'n you kin take on them half dozen hossbackers a-comin' yonder and it'll be like old times, no?" Gardner had a heavy rasping voice.

"Pickin's, Port," Nally laughed. "Pickin's!"

"What'll we make it cost Peck an' Burnett, Red?"

"A-plenty, Port!" Nally called back across the moving trail herd, "A purty-plenty!"

The side-pardners had a habit of talking like that. Ignoring men around them. Burnett had watched them start a ruckus in a saloon along the trail just that way. Picking out some man or men. Insulting them until they'd prodded a fight. Then teaming up and tearing into the battle without giving warning. No holds barred. They knew each other's fighting tricks and sided each other accordingly. They wouldn't quit until they'd made a shambles of the place.

"You two curly wolves," Hank Peck drawled, "hang onto your bushy tails!"

The six riders below had split. Three men on each side, they rode off a ways and pulled up and it looked like they were tallying the strung-out cattle that had smelled water and were headed for the river.

"Looks like them jaspers was gittin' a count on your Skillet herd, Riley!" Peck called. "They act like they was takin' delivery."

"Looks that-away, Hank." Burnett was scowling. Riley felt sick inside. Red Nally knew it and was enjoying Riley's disappointment.

"So there ain't no Santy Claus," Nally laughed. He was gingerly tugging at a fleck of peeling skin on his raw beak.

"Be a hell of a note, now," sounded Gardner's heavy voice, "if them Little Muddy cowmen had the real money to lay on the barrelhead fer that may cattle. Three thousand head of longhorns in the Skillet iron. That'd run into real dough, Red."

"No lie about that, Port."

"So we better check the bet to the Little Muddy fellers, Red."

"What I was thinkin', Port." Nally yanked the dry skin loose. It left a fleck of blood. Red took a round metal box from his chaps pocket and pried off the lid and daubed his forefinger into the black axle grease and smeared the black stuff on his raw red nose.

"You two fellers," Peck said, "keep these dogies strung out. Me'n Riley's goin' on down yonder to find out what it's

about. I don't like the looks of things!"

"Don't holler fer me'n Port," Nally called to Peck, "till you need our guns to back your play."

"And when the gunsmoke clears," Gardner bared his big white teeth in a grin, "we'll figger out our bill fer the damages. That right, Red?"

"It'll run into real figgers, Port." Nally laughed. "One hundred dollars per ca'trige, you reckon, Port?"

"You're talkin' chicken feed, Red."

Riley moved through the cattle without bothering their strung-out shuffle, rode up alongside old Hank Peck and they swung on down the slant together, leaving Gardner and Nally up on the rim of the big wide bench. The dry cattle needed no urging now with the smell of water in their nostrils. Long threads of slobber strung out from their mouths like cobwebs. The leaders were traveling at a walk-bawl. Four of the six riders below had moved their horses and were beginning to fan out the lead cattle so as not to let them pile up when they reached the river bank. They were cowhands, Peck and Burnett knew, by the way they were handling the thirsty trail herd leaders.

Two riders were left there and they sat their horses on opposite sides of the strung-out cattle, counting the critters that passed between them. One rider was a big man with a gray spade beard. The rider opposite looked to be no more than a boy.

The bearded man was holding a long whang-leather saddle string in his hands and each time the count tallied up to a hundred he tied a knot in the saddle string and called out in a deep, quiet voice, "Tally a hundred, Jess!"

"Tally one hundred, Dad!" the young cowhand's voice came back.

There came a gap in the strung-out cattle. The man with the spade beard cut Peck and Burnett a hard look. There was a tightness to the set of his mouth. His skin was weathered and there were deeply etched lines around his eyes. He had a ruthless look.

"I am John Ahearn," he growled. "This is my valley."

He still held the knotted saddle string in his left hand. His right was on the bone-handled six-shooter he packed in an open holster.

"I'm Hank Peck. This is Riley Burnett. That's his Skillet brand on them cattle."

"And it ain't had time to peel and hair-over on a lot of them longhorns," Ahearn said. "I got nine knots in my tally string and there's bin half a dozen irons represented on the hides of that many cattle."

PECK'S eyes chilled. He could have given an easy and honest explanation. There was three thousand head in the herd. Burnett had owned a thousand. He had bought another thousand. There was a third thousand belonging to Texas cowmen who had trusted Burnett and Peck enough to send their cattle up the trail on consignment, leaving it to Peck and Burnett to winter and sell their cattle, along with the Skillet steers, the following fall. Everything had been put in the Skillet brand for a road-iron before the trail herd left the Panhandle. It was as simple as that. But something in this spade-bearded cowman's attitude rubbed Peck the wrong way. Finding his Valley of the Little Muddy claimed and settled had left Hank in a bad frame of mind.

"You a brand inspector, Ahearn?" Peck bit off each word. "Let's have a look at your law badge?"

"I'm no brand inspector. I'm wearin' no law badge. But I'm buyin' no rustled cattle."

"What give you the idee this trail herd is fer sale?" Peck was leaning across his saddle horn.

"This is my valley. I need cattle to stock it. I got the money to lay on the barrelhead. But it's got to be a clean herd."

"Whoever told you," Peck's voice sounded grim, "this Skillet trail herd was fer sale, mister?"

John Ahearn's eyes were cold. He cut Riley Burnett a hard look, then stared back at Hank Peck.

"That's twice," Ahearn said, "you've wanted me to think these cattle ain't for sale. That could be your way of dickerin' for a better price. But you make it sound like you was movin' into this valley. Is this some kind of an invasion?"

The cattle were stringing past again. The young cowpuncher on the other side was getting a count on them.

Riley Burnett had been watching the two older men, listening to each word they

spoke. He knew how old Hank Peck felt —because he felt the same way. He cut a look back up on the ridge where Port Gardner and Red Nally sat their horses. He saw Port and Red slide saddle guns from scabbards; the carbine barrels glinted and it looked to Riley as if the two hands were lining their sights.

Riley rode off a ways at a trot, reined up and lifted his voice to a shout. "Hang onto your bushy tails up there—and keep them cattle a-comin'!"

He heard Nally laugh. Then big Port Gardner's voice rolled down the slope. "From where me'n Red's a sittin', it looked like a argument. Me'n Red got our sights raised to the last notch. It'd be pickin's, wouldn't it, Red?"

"Pickin's, Port!"

"Put away them saddle guns!" Burnett felt anger burning inside. "Tend to your cowpunchin'!"

"Tuck in your shirttail, Riley!" Gardner bellowed.

"Take them orders!" Riley called back. "Or go to camp!"

"Them's harsh words, Riley!" Nally laughed. "Sounds like the barkin' of the big dawg with the brass collar. You don't figger me'n Port 'ud take it serious, now! Me'n Port ain't gonna leave the Skillet short-handed that-away. Anyhow it's Hank Peck hired us. Me'n Port stay hired till we're fired by that same Hank Peck. That right, Port?" Nally's rattling laugh had a threat in it.

"That's plumb right, Red."

Riley's face was red now. Gardner and Nally sat their horses up on the rim and their saddle guns glinted in the slanting afternoon sun.

Riley saw the spade-bearded cowman looking at him, shaggy brows knitted in a scowl.

Then old Hank Peck reined his horse and rode up to Riley. "You, Port!" Peck shouted. "You, Red! Riley Burnett's ramroddin' this outfit. You take his orders or by the hell you're both fired! Right here an' right now!"

"We was just a-hoorawin' Riley, Hank!" Nally laughed. "Ain't that right, Port?"

"Just a-funnin', Red." Gardner said. "Just a-funnin'!"

"Save your funnin' till you git to town. Put up them guns. Keep them cattle a-comin' down the slant."

"Shore thing, Hank."

Peck motioned to Riley and they rode back to where Ahearn sat his horse.

"Tally a hundred, Dad!" the young cowhand called.

"Tally a hundred, Jess." Ahearn tied another knot in his whang-leather saddle string.

A grin spread across Peck's leathery face. His hard blue eyes puckered. "Cool-headed boy you got there, mister."

"Girl." The cowman's bearded lips grinned flatly. "My daughter Jessie. Best cowhand I've got."

"Girl!" Old Hank Peck scowled. From under his slanted hatbrim he looked up toward the ridge where Port Gardner and Red Nally were. Then he looked at Ahearn.

"Send her back to the ranch, mister," Hank's voice was low, "before she gits us into a bad ruckus. Those two gents up yonder ain't to be trusted around decent wimmin. Me'n Riley would hate to kill off the two best cowhands we got."

Peck spoke quietly, and he meant each word he said. Ahearn looked at him, then at Riley, and some of his hostility thawed.

RILEY was looking across the moving cattle now, watching Jess Ahearn. She was the first cowgirl he'd ever seen. Ranch girls he had known stayed around the house helping their mothers. Few knew anything about punching cows. They wore gingham aprons instead of levi overalls and leather-fringed chaps. Riley's heart was beating faster. He had always been girl-shy. Even now, at a distance, he watched Jess covertly and his face felt hot. He was excited—and scared of her.

Perhaps it showed, because John Ahearn grinned. Hank's blue eyes twinkled. Then Ahearn's grin hardened into a grim line.

"We got away from the subject. I asked if you was invadin' my range."

"When I was here two years ago," Peck said, "there wasn't nobody here. Nary a cabin or corral. I had in mind to locate here. Riley Burnett sold out in Texas. He wants to locate in Montana. We'll camp tonight on your Little Muddy and move on tomorrow. We'll keep on a-driftin' till we kin locate somewheres. No, sir, we got no notion of invadin' nobody's range."

"I'll pay you a fair price for your cattle," John Ahearn said.

Hank Peck shook his grizzled head. "I'm locatin' Riley Burnett."

"The best range is already located."

"We'll find somethin'," Hank Peck said stubbornly.

"I doubt it. I'm not tryin' to discourage you, understand—"

"You're just dickerin'," Hank's blue eyes puckered shrewdly, "fer a bunch of cheap livestock."

"Providin'," Ahearn grinned, "your herd's clean."

"Clean as a hound's tooth, mister."

"Then we'll tally 'em out and I'll make a deal with you. Drop your herd here in my valley on good feed and water. You and Burnett take a week or two and ride out and see what you kin find. If you locate a free range, move your trail herd along there. If you can't find a location, I'll buy your cattle. Fair enough?"

"Sounds more than fair," Peck said. "Unless there's a trick to it somewhere."

"That'll be my risk," Ahearn said, "as well as yours. You don't look like a man who takes kindly to bein' knifed in the back. And you've got a tough crew of cowhands to back any play you make."

"A trail boss needs a tough crew," Peck said, "to fetch a cattle drive from Texas to Montana. Port Gardner an' Red Nally are good men to take along but they might be troublesome to git shut of at the end of the trail. Me'n Riley Burnett don't look nowwheres for trouble. But on the other hand, we won't be choused around too much. The proposition you made sounds fair and square, mister. I'd shore hate to think otherwise."

"I've got located here," John Ahearn said quietly. "My missus is yonder at the ranch. That's my eighteen-year-old daughter Jessie. We came here, across the plains, by wagon train. This is our home ranch. I want only peace—even if I have to fight for it with a gun. You've got your tough cowhands. Yonder are four of my cowpunchers who'll not quit me in trouble. They have proved their loyalty and are willing to prove it again. If any of your outfit can't be trusted around decent women, then keep them away from my daughter and my wife. Because if any man insults my women folks, I'll kill him. And if I'm not there, any man in my outfit will do the chores for me."

"Tally a hundred, Dad!" Jessie Ahearn called.

"Tally a hundred, Jess." Ahearn tied another knot in his whang-leather string.

Hank Peck took a small leather-bound vest pocket book and stub pencil from his shirt pocket.

"Here's the tally. It's got every brand and earmark and owners' names. What's ourn and what belongs to the cowmen that trusted us to fetch their cattle north. And the tally fetched up to date. No need of your tallyin' these cattle out even if you buy 'em. Providin' you're willin' to take a man's word."

"I'll take your word," Ahearn said. Then: "Never mind the tally, Jess. Slip through without slowin' up them cattle."

Jessie showed her savvy when she angled through the strung-out cattle and rode up alongside the three men.

"Meet Hank Peck," her father said, "and Riley Burnett, who owns this herd. Riley is the one who has bin tryin' not to keep an eye on you since he found out you wasn't a boy."

Riley pulled the sweat-marked old Stetson from his head. He was suddenly self-conscious of the fact that he was dusty and needed a shave and haircut and a hot, soapy scrubbing, and that he stank of stale sweat.

Jessie had curly dark hair that showed coppery highlights in the sun. Freckles sprinkled her small nose and tanned cheeks. Her red lips parted in a quick smile that showed even white teeth.

"Don't let Dad tease you, Riley." She pulled off a buckskin glove and held out a slim, tanned hand.

Riley grinned embarrassedly. He took her hand clumsily and let go of it too quickly.

"You've made a deal for the cattle, Dad?" She had the good sense to turn aside Riley's embarrassment.

"Not exactly, Jess. They're huntin' a range of their own. They'll camp here on the river a while and scout around for a location."

"There's the lower valley—"

"The Valley of the Little Muddy," Ahearn's voice was suddenly grim, "is all mine."

There followed an awkward silence. The

girl's tanned cheeks reddened under the stern rebuke of her father.

"Take Riley Burnett on to the ranch, Jess. I'll show Hank Peck where to camp his wagons."

"Come along, Riley." Jessie seemed glad of the chance to ride away.

Riley saw Gardner and Nally riding down off the rim. And he saw two of Ahearn's men riding toward Ahearn. Riley hesitated, but Peck grinned faintly and motioned for him to ride along with Jessie.

"Don't fret yourself, son," Peck said. "There'll be no kind of ruckus."

Riley rode up alongside the girl and she headed toward the log buildings and pole corrals where the ranch was.

"You're Texans." The smile was gone. Her eyes were shadowed.

"Yes ma'am."

Riley wondered what was wrong. The way she said 'Texans', it was though she hated the sound; as if it tasted bad in her mouth.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Swede

THEY met the two cowpunchers who worked for John Ahearn. The older man was small, wiry and hatchet-faced; he had a pair of wicked black eyes that peered sharply at Riley from under crooked brows. He rode past, looked back across his shoulder and then moved on at a long, high trot.

The younger puncher was about thirty. Tall and slim, he rode with a sort of saddle swagger. He had on a new red flannel shirt and a pair of buckskin-foxed plaid wool California pants and a six-shooter tied down in a carved Mexican holster. His lean jaw was clean-shaved, he wore a neatly trimmed mustache and his hair was trimmed. His grin was a half sneer and he looked Riley over as though sizing up a range tramp. His spurs and bridle bit were silver-mounted; his center fire saddle was hand-carved and the stirrups covered by long, pointed tapaderos. Riley hated the man on first sight.

"Shake hands with Riley Burnett, Jack. Riley owns this Skillet trail herd. Meet Jack Ahearn, Riley. California Jack. He's my second or fifth cousin. He'll ramrod the Diamond A outfit if ever we get enough cattle to stock the Valley of the Little Muddy."

California Jack Ahearn made no move to pull the buckskin glove from his right hand. Nor did Riley Burnett offer to shake hands.

"John havin' some kind of trouble back yonder, Jess?" Jack's yellow eyes had looked Riley over and now they were fixed on the girl with an arrogant, possessive look.

"There's no trouble," Jessie Ahearn spoke quickly, "of any kind."

"By God, if there is," California Jack went on, ignoring her quick denial, "it can be stopped before it gets a start. How about it, Texican?"

Riley looked straight into the yellow eyes and felt his face redden. The dude's gloved hand was on his ivory-handled gun. This California Jack wanted to make a show in front of the girl; his hand was edging slowly toward his gun. Perhaps the range dude was fast. There was only one way to find out; Riley wasn't backing down while this girl was looking on.

Jessie crowded her horse in between. Her face had lost its healthy color and the tiny freckles showed and her eyes were almost black.

"Quit it, Jack!" Her voice was brittle. "He's going to the ranch with me. Riley is our guest. Come along, Riley."

California Jack smiled thinly and shrugged. He was aboard a palomino and now he lifted the big gelding to a lope and rode away.

"We'll pick it up later, Texican," he said flatly as he moved on.

"Texican." Riley grinned faintly. "First time I was ever called a Texican. First time I ever heard the name. Texican! The way he said it, he made it sound like a fightin' word."

"He hates Texans. I don't know why. And at times he's a little overbearing. Don't let it bother you too much, Riley."

"You called him California Jack."

"He calls himself California Jack—that's where he comes from."

*"Texican!"* Burnett had shed his shyness. Hatred for the big, yellow-eyed spur-jingler had taken the place of bashfulness.

"Next time that dude cousin of yours calls me a Texican," Riley said, "I'm goin' to call him a California Mexican."

"California Mexican? That a fighting name, Riley?"

"So I've bin told. Like callin' a Mexican a greaser. Like callin' a white man a gringo. All depends on who you say it to and how you say it—and what you have in mind when you say it. Savvy?"

"I savvy." Jessie smiled.

"I'd like to be around, Riley, when you call Jack a California Mexican."

"It won't be no place for a lady," Riley told her.

"I know. Just the same I want to be there. I want to be close enough to watch Ahearn's eyes."

"Why?"

Jessie Ahearn's smile faded. "It's hard to explain something you can't understand, Riley. There's something about his eyes that don't belong to an Ahearn. They're not the eyes of a white man. I had a mountain lion cub once. I bottle-raised him on cow's milk and it was as gentle as a big, overgrown kitten. He used to curl up on my bed at night; followed me everywhere I went. He was half grown when he turned on me. I've still got the scars on my back where he clawed me. He'd jumped my back, tackled me from behind. He'd have killed me if Dad hadn't heard my screams and come a-runnin' and shot him. That lion cub had eyes just like California Jack's."

"WHEN you called me'n Hank Peck Texans," Riley said, watching her as he rode alongside, "you kinda spit it out like you'd bit into somethin' that had a bad taste. What have you Ahearns got against the Texans?" He softened the question with a lop-sided grin.

"Dad, mother and I never met any Texans," Jessie said. "But when California Jack showed up he began telling us about the Texans. How they considered themselves apart from the rest of the United States. How they considered the Lone Star State a country apart. Texans were ruthless and cold-blooded and they took what they wanted wherever they went. They had taken what they called Texas away from Mexico. Now they had overstocked their own range with long-horned cattle and they had to trail those longhorns north to new range, and when they came to a cow country they liked, they claimed it. And if that new cow country was already settled—like my father has settled here in the Valley of the Little Muddy—the Texans killed off the settlers and claimed that range. You're the first Texans who have showed up here. You spilled your Skillet trail herd into the valley like you were claiming it."

Jessie was no longer smiling. Her eyes were as hard as agate. Her voice sounded brittle.

"So you believe everything California Jack told you about the Texans?" Burnett's grin spread.

"We were prepared to believe the worst." Jessie was studying him.

"But John Ahearn is a man who will give even the Texans a fair chance to prove themselves white men."

"That's right."

"But California Jack won't play it accordin' to Ahearn."

Jessie nodded. "California Jack hates Texicans—and he knows how to hate."

"And Jack has hired himself a bunch of gun-slingers to back his play," Riley said.

"How did you know that?"

"I got a good look at that mean-eyed hombre he had with him. That gent has the eyes of a killer. He don't look like the breed of cowhand Ahearn would hire. How many more gun-slingers has California got takin' his fightin' orders?"

"There's six," Jessie said. "They don't stay at the home ranch. They've got their own pack outfit and they move camp up and down the valley. Dad has no use for a cowpuncher crew. We have no cattle. No work they'd do. Because if a job can't be done a-horseback, California Jack's cowboys won't step out of their saddles to dirty their hands with common labor. We had to hire 'breeds to build the cabins and corrals and fence the hay meadows. But California claims that all real cowhands are like that."

Riley grinned and nodded. "He ain't lyin' there. But that hatchet-faced feller had the earmarks of a renegade. Six gun-slingers, you said? That should satisfy Gardner and Nally. That pair like it best when the odds are against 'em."

Riley twisted in his saddle and looked back across his shoulder. He saw that Port and Red had fanned out the swing of the

drive, and two men on the drag had come up, and they were spreading the cattle that came off the ridge so that they'd scatter wide by the time they reached the river. It was good cowpunching and wasn't as easy as it looked. Riley was satisfied.

Then he watched Gardner and Nally riding down to where Peck and Ahearn sat their horses. Port and Red got there about the same time California Jack and his gimlet-eyed cowhand arrived.

Riley pulled up, his hand on his six-shooter. He wasn't quitting old Hank Peck in any kind of a tight. But Hank saw Riley rein up and the old cowhand pulled off his battered hat and motioned him to go on with Jessie to the ranch.

"I bin takin' orders from old Hank since I was hock high to my first saddle pony," Riley told Jessie. "He means for me to take you home. Mebby to git us both plumb gone if a ruckus starts. Most mebby to keep Port and Red from seein' a purty girl. Because that's a pair of tough sons-a-guns that really live up to the bad rep California Jack gives all Texans. If Texicans is a fightin' name, then I reckon Gardner and Nally fit the description."

"Then you fetched along your own gun-fighters?" Jessie's smile was mirthless.

"We had to fetch that drive up a long, tough trail, Jessie. Parts of it are dangerous. Like the strip called No Man's Land where there's cattle rustler gangs layin' in wait to kill you off and steal your cattle."

"This Port Gardner and Red Nally," Jessie Ahearn said, "are apt to get out of hand, aren't they? From what I overheard back yonder—"

Riley's tanned reddened. "Port and Red might git tough to pay off at the end of the trail. In that case. . . ." Riley let it hang there.

"John Ahearn wants peace," his daughter said quietly. "He'll fight to get it. You heard him say that."

"And I respect him for it. And I don't want you or your mother or your father to git any wrong notions about this Skillet trail herd. We're not invaders. John Ahearn wants us to turn our cattle loose here in the valley. He's about got Hank Peck talked into the notion—and it sounded shore fair enough to Hank and me. That is, until I met this California Jack." Burnett looked grim.

"Much as John Ahearn and Hank Peck and me want peace, Jessie, there's goin' to be trouble here. I don't know when it will come or how it will start. But when it does bust loose, I want you to know right now that I'm on John Ahearn's side and so is Hank. And rather than have you or your mother hurt in any way, I'll move this trail herd on tomorrow if California Jack will let us trail out. I'm tellin' you now. Before the play gits taken away from me."

Jessie took Riley's hand and her eyes softened. "I understand, Riley. And I'll keep on remembering. I'm glad it's you and Hank Peck that fetched the first cattle here. John Ahearn needs a friend."

RILEY felt the grip of her gloved hand; felt the hand tremble. He peeled back her buckskin glove. Her hand was cold with the cold fear he had read in her dark gray eyes.

"I don't know how much of it John Ahearn suspects," Jessie said. "Dad's a stern, close-mouthed man. And he don't want to worry my mother or me with his fears. But he must suspect what Jack has planned. California has been waiting for a herd to show up. I've overheard enough of his talk to know he wants this herd turned loose in the valley. He plans on killing the trail boss and cowhands. You'll never trail out without a fight. But don't put the blame on my father. California Jack is ramrodding it. You and Hank have trailed your cattle into a trap."

"John Ahearn acted almighty suspicious when me'n Hank met him," Riley said. "He accused us of havin' stuff that wasn't clean. He looked us over like we was cattle rustlers."

"Because that's the kind of herd California told us would be spilled into the valley. Stolen cattle handled by rustlers—Texicans!"

"But John Ahearn changed his mind some," Burnett said quietly, "when he'd talked to Peck and sized me up."

"John Ahearn," smiled the girl, "is a hard man to fool. I'm supposed to take after my father in lots of ways. You might be a little trail-soiled, Riley, but you don't look like a cattle thief or a killer. And when I get the chance I'm going to give your old Hank Peck a hug and kiss."

"God sakes." Riley grinned. "That old

warthawg will go on the rest of his life with his head in the clouds. Goda-mighty—"

"Like this."

Jessie leaned from her saddle and took *Riley's stubbled face in her hands and* kissed him hard on his mouth.

Riley's face got red. His eyes widened. Jessie's face was flushed and her laugh was a little shaky. "Like that, Riley. Now you'll think I'm a bold, brazen hussy."

The girl said then that she wanted Riley to meet her mother.

"She's a brave woman, Riley, but she's been worried since the day California Jack rode up to the ranch and told us he was a distant cousin. His father and mine were cousins. His father had followed the gold rush to California and married there. Jack was their son. Named, he claimed, after my father. California Jack said we'd need his help against the Texican invaders when they came.

"And it wasn't long before Fancher—that is the hatchet-faced man—and the other cowhands filtered in. And when Dad told Jack they couldn't stay at the ranch, playing poker, drinking whiskey and quarreling, Jack moved his outfit down the valley. Dad has tried to hide his worries from mother and me but it shows."

From up the valley came a shout. Riley groaned. His face twisted in a lop-sided grin. Then he was scowling.

"That's the locoed Swede," he said bluntly. "If you got a dangerous powder keg you want blowed up, yonder comes the feller with the match."

The chuck and bed wagon and remuda of saddle horses and wagon mules were coming down off the bench by way of the wagon road. Riley pointed at the horse wrangler.

Hazing the remuda down the slant, headed for the river, rode the horse wrangler yelling like a drunk Injun.

The wrangler hazed his remuda to a lope, heading toward the river. When the horses and extra wagon mules reached the river's edge the wrangler turned his remuda loose. He headed for the cattle fanned out along the river. And, with a total disregard for the rules that govern the proper handling of cattle, the man rode through the herd. But the cattle were dry and headed for water: the ones that had watered had been eased across the river and were grazing hock deep on good feed and even this wild rider could not disturb the herd.

"If he's got a real name," Riley said, *"I never heard it. Red Nally branded him* Swede and that's all the handle he's got. Our wrangler got drunk at one of the cowtowns along the trail and turned the remuda loose while Hank and I was in town. When we got to camp there was this big, wild-eyed thing handlin' the horse cavvy. Not only that. He'd throwed in a dozen or fifteen jug-headed broncs, one of 'em packin' the feller's bed. He hired himself out to the trail outfit, regardless.

"Port and Red had gotten into some kind of a town ruckus and we was anxious to move on up the trail before that tough pair got the whole darned outfit into trouble so we moved yonderly and the Swede stayed with us. He's bigger'n a skinned mule and has the brain of a fourteen-year-old boy. He's got broncs in his rough string that even Nally can't ride and Gardner's scared of, and that's really sayin' something.

"Nally jobbed the Swede when he first threw in with the outfit. One of Red's jokes. Red and Port commenced to laugh. And the Swede had a grin on his face. He was still grinnin' when he grabbed Nally and Gardner and slammed their heads together. Them two skulls cracked together with a noise like two dry gourds. They was out cold for an hour. They let the Swede alone after that—Oh-oh! Yonder rides trouble! Git for home, Jessie! The Swede's scratched his match and the powder keg's handy."

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Back-Waterin' Dude

RILEY reined his horses and hit a lope. Two of the four cowhands California Jack had left to ride herd on the Skillet cattle had heard the wild whooping and were riding toward the Swede, who was twisting his bronc through the scattered cattle. They were heading him off and the Swede was paying them no attention.

They reached the Swede while Riley was still two hundred yards away. They rode up on the bronc rider, one on each

side of him. He was damn well whip-sawed between them.

"What the hell you tryin' do?" one of the cowhands barked. "Spill these cattle?"

"You drunk?" the other man snarled. "Or locoed?"

Riley heard the Swede's laugh. He was still laughing when he reached out and grabbed the man on his right. With one big sweeping yank he lifted him from his saddle and yanked him up across his lunging bronc and flung the man bodily. Flung him like you'd heave a lightweight sack. Flung him straight at the other man.

The second man had a gun in his hand. It exploded as his companion struck him broadside. Both men were in a tangle on the horse. The cowhand who had been yanked from his saddle was kicking with both legs, his arms swinging wildly. He grabbed the other man around the neck and his swinging weight pulled them both off on one side of the horse. The Swede spurred his bronc into the whirling horse. The two men were on the ground and they came untangled and scrambled crab-wise to get out from under the trampling hoofs. They were shaken, bruised, skinned-up and scared and their panicky fright mixed with fury. One dropped the six-shooter that had gone off.

The other had scrambled free of the tangle and up onto his feet. He was the man who had been yanked out of his saddle; he was cursing and spitting blood and broken teeth as he clawed for his gun.

He had the six-shooter in his hand and was thumbing back the hammer. Swede was riding his bronc with a hackamore and the bronc was pitching and bawling and the Swede was whooping and laughing and putting up one of his wild scratching, fanning grandstand bronc rides.

Riley spurred up behind the cowhand on the ground just as the man, standing spread-legged, lifted the six-shooter in both hands to take a pot-shot at the Swede.

Riley had his gun in his hand.

"The hell you will!" gritted Riley, and he spurred up behind the man who had murder in his mind.

The man heard Riley and his horse and turned, spitting blood and dirt. Riley reined his horse a little to the left. He leaned over and clubbed the hatless man over the head with the gun barrel.

The cowhand's legs buckled at the knees and his head lobbed forward and he went down with his gun gripped in both hands.

"That'll cool that fever you got, mister." Riley reined up close to the other man, who was clawing desperately inside his shirt. "If that's a sneak gun you're tryin' to git at," Riley said, "better think it over. Unless you feel lucky."

The man's hand came out slowly from inside his shirt—empty. He was breathing hard. He stood six foot, rawboned and lantern-jawed, his bloodshot eyes narrowed.

"From now on," Burnett said, "leave my cattle and my men alone. Load your pardner on his horse and drag it. Pass him the warnin' when he comes alive."

The Swede got his bronc's head pulled up and loped back. He'd been fanning his pitching bronc with his old black hat and he had it in his hand. His shock of uncut dirty yellow hair was like the snarled mane of a wild mustang. Dust and sweat grimed his yellow whiskers.

The Swede slid his wall-eyed roan to a halt. His bloodshot eyes stared past Riley.

Riley turned his head and saw Jessie Ahearn riding up. He heard the Swede's voice, low-pitched.

Riley still had his six-shooter in his hand and when he turned and eyed the Swede his gun pointed at his belly.

"Damned if it ain't a gurl!" The Swede spoke in a harsh whisper.

"Watch yourself, Swede!" Burnett's voice whipped out. "I don't want to kill you but I'll shoot you like I'd kill a mad dog. Savvy?"

The Swede turned his eyes from the girl and looked at Riley. It wasn't a sane look. Riley's thumb was on his gun hammer.

John Ahearn and Peck rode up. Behind them rode California Jack, Fancher, Port Gardner and Red Nally. They all had their hands near their guns and their eyes were hard.

"What goes on here, Riley?" Peck's voice sounded quiet.

Riley saw the insane look die in the green eyes of the Swede; saw the Swede's bulk relax and slump in his saddle.

Riley looked past the others and straight into the eyes of California Jack.

"Keep your tough cowhands away from my men. And plumb away from my cattle," he said softly.

THE Swede had touched his match to the fuse—and Riley Burnett was fanning the spark. If this powder keg was bound to blow it might as well go now as later. Now, when the Skillet outfit had the bulge.

Riley never took his eyes from California Jack. He sensed rather than saw John Ahearn motion Jessie away. She obeyed and Riley heard the sound of her horse loping away.

The man Riley had hit over the head was getting to his feet and he had his gun in his hand. His raw-boned pardner had his gun hand shoved inside his shirt. There was the hatchet-faced, gimlet-eyed Fancher, quick as a weasel.

The Swede packed a gun but nobody in the Skillet outfit had ever seen him pull it on a man. But all the way up the trail the Swede had blazed away at jackrabbits and prairie dogs, and when he ran out of cartridges he swiped more from the warsacks of the other men. If the Swede ever went as crazy with a gun as he did when he hung his spurs in a bronc's shoulders, he would be hell torn loose from its hinges. The Swede was watching Jessie ride away. And when his green eyes quit following her they were fixed, not on any of California Jack's gun-slingers, but on Nally and Gardner. The Swede was muttering something unintelligible. . . .

Gardner and Nally had cut each other a quick, meaning look. Then their guns were out, the blued steel glinting in the sunset.

"Looks like Riley's got a horn drooped, Red."

"No paw an' beller, Port, when Riley's on the prod. He just charges—and he hooks deep."

"You got yourn picked out, Red?"

"Unless you want this Fancher thing, Port."

"You kin have 'im, Red. I'll take them two sorry lookin' 'uns. Though a man shores hates to pick on cripples thataway. . . ."

Nally laughed. "You kin open up the jackpot, Riley. Me'n Port is a-ra'rin' to go!"

This was it and Riley had what backing he needed. The Skillet had the bulge and now was the time for Riley to ride his luck.

"You called me a Texican." Riley spoke flatly. "You feel like tellin' me what is a Texican?" Burnett was smiling, thinly.

Riley saw the pale yellow eyes glitter. Animal eyes. California darted a quick look around. And what he saw he didn't like. He and his cowhands wouldn't stand a fighting chance. Fancher was covered by the gun in Nally's hand. His other two men looked beat-up and in no shape to shoot fast and straight. John Ahearn and Hank Peck sat their horses side by side like they were spectators and friends of long standing. And that big Swede gave a man the cold shivers. And there was Riley Burnett's gun pointed at his red-shirted belly.

"I'll tell you what a Texican is," said California Jack, "when the sign is right. This ain't the time or place to tell it to you, Texican."

California kept his buckskin-gloved hands on the horn of his fancy center fire saddle. He was recovering something of his swagger. He told the two men on the ground to fork their horses.

"We're goin' to camp." California had the flat-toned voice of a gambler.

"I told you once," Riley said. "I'm tellin' you again. And for the last time. Don't bother my men till you kin show more guts than you're showin' now. Then come a-shootin'. We'll be ready. Now drag it."

California slapped one of his long tapaderos along the shoulder of his big palomino and rode away with a saddle swagger and without a backward glance. Fancher and the other two cowhands followed and overtook him and they rode off together.

Hank Peck took over. He did it quietly and so unobtrusively that it seemed the natural thing to do.

"You might as well git along to camp, boys. Take the rest of the outfit along. And the Swede better lope on an' help the cook set up his outfit before he gits ringy an' quits again. And you fellers'll have to take turns rasslin' your own grub. Me'n Riley is goin' on to the ranch with John Ahearn. You heard what Riley told that big red-shirted feller. Keep your eyes open. But don't go on the prowl fer trouble. Stay at camp. Directly the Swede gits his corral up an' the remuda in, ketch fresh horses. Tie up fresh horses fer me'n Riley. There'll be no night guard to stand. But that's no reason to set yourselves afoot. Just one thing more. Stay away from Ahearn's home

ranch. Pass that along to the other men. Any man quittin' camp is fired."

"Meanin' me'n Port?" Nally asked.

"That goes double," Hank Peck said, "for you an' Port Gardner."

Nally was laughing when he and Port rode off, headed for where the wagons were camped up the river and above where the cattle watered. Swede rode away alone, headed for his remuda.

There were eight cowhands in the outfit. One was driving the bed wagon. Driving the bed wagon was the nighthawk's job but the Swede had insisted on nighthawking his remuda because he sort of claimed sole right to handle the horses. The cook was a broken down cowhand whose temper was as cranky as his brittle bones.

The punchers were already at camp or on their way. This was the end of the trail, they figured. And they were looking forward to washing off the trail dust in the river and roundsiding. Red and Port would take them the war news and that tough pair was anxious and eager to get the others stirred up and ready for a gun ruckus. The Swede had his own warped ideas inside his skull.

"I reckon," Riley Burnett rode along between old Hank Peck and the Ahearn, "I kinda stirred up the hornets."

"First time I ever knowed you to go off half-cocked, son," Hank Peck said quietly. "You made a mistake," Ahearn said.

Riley felt resentment stirring inside him. After all, he hadn't started the trouble. He'd played it the only way he knew how to play the cards that had been dealt him.

"The mistake you made," Ahearn looked across Riley's hat at Hank Peck, "was when you let Califorina Jack and those three renegades ride away alive."

Peck grinned. "John Ahearn is a good man, son. We're makin' a dicker with him to locate here in the Valley of the Little Muddy. But from what he tells me, we're due to have some trouble gittin' settled down peaceful."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### California Mexican

MOM AHEARN had graying hair, apple cheeks and a buxom figure. When Ahearn said she was the best cook on earth Peck and Burnett agreed. She was the best they had ever seen.

Peck got that unexpected hug and kiss from Jessie, while Riley, Ahearn and Mom Ahearn enjoyed the old trail-boss's discomfiture. Then Hank told Riley, while they washed up with hot water and homemade soft soap, and dried on a clean roller towel, that if Riley didn't shine up to that girl, then he, Hank Peck, would.

"You git shut of that danged girl-shy awkwardness, son. Clean up and dig some town duds outa your warsack. You gotta out-dude that danged spur-jinglin' California Jack. He's got a fancy loop built fer her. You'd a shore saved yourself trouble if you'd a gut-shot that fancy feller."

Riley promised Hank he'd do the best he could. Hank said that wasn't strong enough. That Riley would have to do a heap better than ever Hank had seen him do down in Texas.

"Because," Peck lowered his voice, "she's promised to marry California Jack."

*"Uh?"* Riley toweled the water out of his eyes.

"You that deef you want me to put it in writin'?"

"Who told you that lie?" Anger and jealousy tightened Riley's belly in a knot.

"That gal's mom wouldn't tell me no lie. John Ahearn don't know about this, but he might suspicion it. He's a hard man to fool. Mom Ahearn told me when she taken me out back here to the lean-to to show me where was the wash basin."

After supper, while the three men sat outside with their tobacco, John Ahearn and Hank Peck talked, and for the most part as if young Riley Burnett wasn't there at all. After Hank had kicked the hide off Riley's shins a few times Riley left the two older men and went into the kitchen. 'For a drink of water.'

Jessie had changed to a red and white checked gingham dress. She looked so pretty that Riley was tongue-tied and had to keep sidling around because the seat of his overalls was threadbare. Though he had slipped off and taken a soapy bath in the river, and put on some clean underwear and a shirt belonging to John Ahearn, the cowman's overalls were far too big. He wasn't exactly dressed to go a-courtin' and was painfully aware of it.

But when Jessie's dark eyes teased him,

Mom Ahearn took away her daughter's dishtowel and told her to take Riley down to the river and see if they couldn't snare a mess of catfish for breakfast.

Jessie got two fishpoles with lines attached, a can of liver for bait and walked down to the river bank. There was the smell of river mud and the fragrance of wild roses. The fishing would be no good, because the herd had watered just above, and Jessie knew it, but she showed Riley how to bait his hook and she said catfish bit better after dark and all you had to do was sit there and be sort of quiet and take it easy. When you felt a nibble you should wait and not jerk the pole and then, when the line really tightened and you felt the weight of a ten-pound catfish, you pulled 'im in.

They hadn't fished a quarter of an hour before Riley got a bite and landed a catfish and got excited and grabbed it and got his hand pierced by one of the 'whiskers.' It was like running a long sharp thorn into the muscle of his thumb. He let out a little grunt. But Jessie knew what had happened. She got the big catfish unhooked and shoved it into the gunnysack.

She told him to slosh his hand in the river, then suck the blood from the wound. Then she was squeezing out the sluggish blood with her thumbs and neither of them paid any attention to the sound of a horseman riding up to the ranch.

Riley was trying to get up enough courage to tell her she looked pretty, or to put his free arm around her, when the jingle of spurs sounded coming down the trail. Then California Jack's flat-toned voice reached them.

"Where I come from," California Jack had his gun in his hand, cocked and pointed at Riley, "we kill a damn' Texican when he tries to monkey with our girl!"

"And where is it," Riley was moving slowly so as not to spook Jack into pulling the trigger, "that you come from—you California Mexican?"

Riley had turned and was getting to his feet under the threat of the gun. He was on all fours, his legs levered in under him, in a crouch. He expected a shot and twisted sideways, timing it, he thought, to beat it by a split second. He crouched lower instead of jumping to his feet.

It was the wrong move. California came in fast and kicked Riley in the face. The boot heel caught Riley under the jaw. He went over backwards—off the high twenty-foot bank down into the river below.

Riley was half knocked out when he went under. The shock of the cold water helped him. He went down deep; he kicked and flailed his arms and came up, gasping, and the swift current was trying to suck him under. Riley didn't know how to swim. He was panicked now; one hand grabbed something. It was the root of a giant cottonwood exposed where the current had cut away the clay bank. He hung onto it and his brain cleared and the panic was gone.

Above, he heard voices. Jessie's voice, sharp with anger. "Let go of me, you damn' coward! You murderer!"

Then the voice of old Hank Peck. "Back up, big mister! Drop that gun—or use it!"

John Ahearn's voice. Deep-toned, dangerous. "Git back to the house, Jessie."

Old Hank said slowly, "Riley Burnett can't swim a lick."

RILEY was pulling himself up out of the water, hand over hand up the big tree root. He saw Jessie poised on the bank above, staring down at the water. Then she dove straight down and her slim body cut the surface and she came up. She was treading water, looking around.

Riley had pulled himself clear of the water. She saw him and swam over to him.

"Hang an' rattle!" She whispered.

He knew she could handle herself in the water so he went on up. He was too excited to notice the weight of his sodden clothes. Then he was up on the grassy bank and he grinned flatly at what he saw.

California was standing with both hands lifted. Facing him was old Hank Peck. Hank's six-shooter was pointed at the dude.

"Just hold the big son that-away, Hank," Riley spat out the blood that came from his smashed lips, "till I shed this shirt."

John Ahearn was squatted on all fours, hauling Jessie up onto the bank.

"Turn 'im loose, Hank! Lemme have 'im."

Peck lowered his gun and Burnett charged like a bull.

Riley was no fist fighter; few cowboys are. They fight without rules. Riley had learned it the hard way that the man who

gets in the first licks usually has the ruckus won. He bored in, his weight behind each jabbing punch to the belly. Riley felt the vicious blows that pounded his face and head but he kept ripping and tearing in. They went down in a tangle. Riley felt teeth bite his naked shoulder. He got one hand free and grabbed yellow hair and yanked and felt a wrenching pain in his shoulder where Jack's teeth tore the flesh. Riley held California's head and began smashing the face and eyes. Blood sprayed from the smashed nose.

"What's a Texican?" Riley was blowing hard, spitting blood. "What's a Texican, you yellow-eyed California Mexican son?"

Burnett was killing this man with his hands and that was the only thought in him. He never gave California time to give an answer. He yanked the head back and pounded the blood-smeared face. Killer-hate shut the rest of the world out for Burnett.

Then Riley felt somebody pulling his hair and dimly, like in some nightmare, he heard the voice of Jessie Ahearn and it sounded brittle as breaking glass.

"Let him up! Don't kill him! Not like that, Riley! Riley! Not like that!" But Riley snarled and spat blood and kept pounding that bloody face.

Then Peck and Ahearn pulled Burnett off Jack. They held him, and he was blowing like a spent runner.

"What's a Texican you California Mexican hound?"

California Jack got to his feet. He staggered like a drunk. His shirt and buckskin-foxed California pants were torn and blood-spattered.

"Fork your horse," Hank Peck said. "Git. Before I turn Burnett loose to finish his job."

Jack saw his pearl-handled, silver-mounted gun on the ground but he didn't pick it up until Peck told him to take his purty gun with him.

"But leave your hat," Peck said. "Riley lost his in the river."

California Jack lost no time getting away

Peck let go of Riley. The red film cleared from Riley's eyes and he wiped the water, dirt and blood from his mouth. He looked around and saw Jessie standing there, her father's arm about her shoulders. Her new dress was sopping wet.

Riley flinched under her stare and turned away. He headed for the barn where he and Hank had stabled their horses. Nobody said a word to stop him.

Hank Peck lingered behind. The grizzled trail boss looked grim. He walked over to where California Jack's hat lay trampled on the ground and picked it up.

Jessie had her face buried now against her father's chest and he was holding her and stroking her wet hair. He looked at Hank Peck and nodded and Hank nodded and walked away, following Riley to the big log barn. They saddled their horses in silence and rode away, headed for camp. Mom Ahearn watched from the cabin door as they moved away.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### "Come A-shootin'!"

THE Swede had turned the Skillet remuda into John Ahearn's horse pasture and had then disappeared. The men at

TOPS FOR QUALITY

BIGGER AND BETTER

camp didn't know where the man had gone; nobody ever asked the Swede where he was going when he took one of his lone, wild prowls.

Port Gardner and Red Nally were also missing. But the cook and the six other Skillet cowhands were there where the chuck wagon were camped and the rope corral was put up.

"Red and Port," said the cranky round-up cook, "changed horses and drug it to hell out of here."

Riley stripped. He unrolled his tarp-covered bed and got clean clothes out of his warsack. He washed up, shaved and put on dry clean clothes. But he wouldn't wear California's expensive Stetson.

"I might git a crop of head-lice." Riley didn't grin when he said it.

The ornery round-up cook dug into his chuck wagon and brought out a brand new hat. He handed it to Riley with a grin. "From what Hank let slip," he chuckled, "you win it."

Somebody had left night horses for Riley and Hank tied to the bed wagon wheel. And old Hank Peck got the bad news from the Skillet men who were there at camp.

Port Gardner and Red Nally had met California Jack somewhere about supper time. All three had ridden back to the Skillet camp. Port and Red had called aside the Skillet cowhands, one or in pairs, at a time. And Red and Port had propositioned them. California Jack had backed up that tough pair.

Gardner and Nally said they were all done working for wages. That here was the Valley of the Little Muddy. And now it was well stocked with Skillet cattle. And it was all theirs for the taking. And they aimed to take it. Port Gardner and Red Nally and California Jack. And anybody who had the guts and sense to throw in with them would get paid off in big money when they'd got what they aimed to get here in this valley.

"We ain't none of us pure-hearted, Hank," said the tough cowhand who told it for them all. "But, on the other hand, we ain't blacklegs, neither. We're still a-workin' for the Skillet. You're the trail boss. Riley Burnett owns the iron. You an' Riley always treated us right. We got a right to cuss the grub and the dust and the outfit. But, by holy hell, no real cowhand has got the right to knife his outfit in the back. We're still takin' orders from Hank Peck an' Riley Burnett. Looks like them's goin' to be fightin' orders from here on. That suits us boys. Whatever you say, Hank, you an' Riley, goes with us."

Hank Peck grinned. He said he and Riley was much obliged. And nobody here in this Skillet outfit would lose by it. If he lived that long.

"We might as well ride on to the Ahearn place. Just leave camp like it is. All you'll need is your guns an' plenty ca'tridges."

The cook had a saddle horse tied up. Just in case, he explained. He wanted to take along his sourdough keg but Hank said Mom Ahearn had her sourdough. And they'd enjoy her grub for a change.

"No slurs meant," old Hank grinned at the cook, "ag'in your grub."

The grizzled old round-up cook jerked off his floursack apron and tromped on it and he was humming tunelessly when he buckled on a cartridge belt and six-shooter and took a carbine from his chuck wagon seat.

Riley Burnett and old Hank Peck led the way back to the Ahearn ranch. They were riding along at a slow cowpuncher trot when they heard the sound of firing at the ranch. They spurred their horses to a run and never pulled up till they reached the ranch. They all had saddle carbines that the Skillet furnished along with free ammunition. Their guns were in their hands when they pulled up at the big log barn. The log house and bunkhouse were in darkness.

John Ahearn stepped out of the dark barn, a saddle gun in the crook of his arm. "That big Swede," he said, "showed up. He came to marry Jessie. I had to run him off with a gun. Next time he rides up that-away, I'll have to kill him."

Riley Burnett sat stiff in his saddle. He felt cold inside. Old Hank Peck nodded. "The Swede is locoed all right, John," Hank Peck said quietly. "Plumb locoed."

Then he told John Ahearn why he had fetched the Skillet cowhands. "Port Gardner and Red Nally have throwed in with California Jack. They aim to take the valley and the Skillet cattle."

Ahearn told them to put their horses in the barn, and for Hank to take charge.

"Back in Oregon," said the spade-

bearded cowman, "we had no experience at this kind of gun work. And coming to Montana over the Oregon Trail was more monotonous than dangerous. I'll do the best I can to make you a gunhand, Hank. After all, I've got something here to fight for."

Hank Peck told John Ahearn to go on to the house and stay with his women-folks. "We won't be asleep," said Peck, "when them fellers ride up."

Ahearn nodded. He was looking at Riley Burnett. And there was something in his dark gray eyes Riley could not understand.

RILEY was dressed now in the best clothes he owned. A blue flannel shirt and a pair of new pants and a new pair of shopmade boots. And the new Stetson hat the cook had given him.

"If you can take time, Riley," John Ahearn said, "to come along to the house with me. Mom has some salve that will be good for your nose."

The Skillet outfit had dismounted. Peck gave Riley a shove that almost upset him. He grabbed Riley's bridle reins and led Riley's horse, along with his own, into the barn.

Riley went on to the house with Ahearn. He took his saddle gun. And he had to quicken his short, stiff, bow-legged stride to keep up with the long-legged cowman.

They went in the kitchen door and into the lamplight and Riley knew now the reason the log house looked unlighted and dark inside was because the curtains were pulled and the windows shuttered. The heavy wooden shutters were fastened on the inside.

Jessie was alone in the kitchen. She had dried her hair and it looked like burnished copper. She had on a gray green gingham dress that looked as brand new as the red-checked dress. Her eyes were red-rimmed like she had been crying. She was making a big pot of fresh coffee.

John Ahearn strode quickly through the kitchen without a word or sidewise look and he went through a door and closed it. That left Riley standing there awkwardly, alone with Jessie.

Her face reddened and for the first time in their brief acquaintance Jessie was awkward.

Riley cleared his throat. The sound stiffened Jessie, who stood there by the stove with a big tin measuring cup filled with coffee.

"Is—is your mom at home?" Riley asked.

It was an inane thing to say. In his mind Burnett was thinking of the salve Ahearn had mentioned. He was using it as a desperate excuse to explain his presence.

Perhaps it was the way he said it, or the way his face reddened, or the uncertain, lop-sided grin, or something in his gray eyes. Or, more than likely, it was something inside him that didn't show and it reached out to something inside Jessie Ahearn's heart.

The tin measuring cup dropped and the ground coffee spilled on the scrubbed pine board kitchen floor. She ran toward him, stumbling blindly, and he met her half way, and his arms were holding her, and he kissed her and she was kissing him, and his bruised mouth began to bleed, and then, after a while, she released his arms and sat him down in a chair and got a clean washrag and the salve. Somebody rapped on the kitchen door. It was the Skillet round-up cook.

"It's me, Riley. Ol' Greasy Ben. Hank sent me to make some coffee and tell you it's breakin' daylight. Them fellers is a-comin' yonder."

Riley slid the gun he'd drawn back into its holster. Jessie came around from behind a big cupboard where Riley had shoved her none too gently. Riley opened the door and the grizzled round-up cook came in. He pulled off his battered old hat and gaped, slack-jawed, at the girl.

"Mebbyso," he said in an almost hushed voice, "it's because you're the first female I've seen in a coon's age, but I'll swear you look purtier'n ary picture I ever laid eyes on." He bowed stiffly from his cartridge belt and made a sweeping, old-fashioned gesture with his battered hat.

Jessie laughed and blushed and said she was pleased to meet him and to come in. The other door opened and John Ahearn and his wife stood there looking almighty pleased about something. Jessie really blushed this time. Because she knew what her mom told her later. That John and Mom Ahearn had been listening on the other side of the door.

"I'm at home, Riley." Mom Ahearn walked over and gave Riley a motherly hug

and a smacking kiss and patted his back. There were unshed tears in her eyes.

Out in the first gray of dawn sounded a single shot. Then came old Hank Peck's voice. "That's as far as you git! From there on you renegades will come a-shootin'!"

## CHAPTER SIX

### Back-Trails

THERE was that lull before the storm broke. While it lasted Riley Burnett found himself taken into the Ahearn family.

"Hank Peck told me who you are, Riley. About your father bein' a captain in the Texas Rangers." John Ahearn smiled. "I've got sharp eyes. If you was bad, I'd see it in you. Like I saw it in California Jack Ahearn, when he showed up. I want you to know what there is to know about that man and the hold he's got on me.

"I hardly remember his father, who was my cousin. But I remember he was a tinhorn gambler. He was a traitor to both sides during the Civil War. A dodger. He dodged into Texas and got run out of Texas into Mexico, and then out of Mexico into California. Somewhere along his crooked trail he married a honkytonk woman. She was a half-caste of some kind. Together they worked confidence games and if the sucker squawked they murdered him. The law caught up with them on the Texas-Mexican border once and put a hangman's rope around his tinhorn neck. But his clever and beautiful wife begged the law into turning him loose. She pleaded that they had their son to support. So the Texas law let Ahearn go with a coat of tar and feathers. He never forgot that hatred for Texans. He called 'em Border Texans—Texicans. And passed that hatred along with the name Texicans, to his son he called Jack.

"Jack Ahearn has the bad blood of both his father and mother. He was a road agent in California. The vigilantes were ten jumps behind him when he quit California.

"He found me here in the Valley of the Little Muddy. Told me who he was. His mother had died of smallpox. His father had been killed by some man who caught him cheating at poker. He called himself California Jack. He said he was going to settle down here. When I threatened to run him off he fetched in his renegades. He called Texicans cold-blooded killers. He said they were bound to trail stolen longhorns here and spill into the valley. They would invade the valley, he kept repeating. They would kill me and my wife and take my daughter prisoner. He said he and his men would repel the invaders. Shoot the Texican cattle rustlers. He said it was no crime to kill a murderer and claim his cattle. When I called him a liar he told me, with Fancher backing him with drawn gun, what would happen to me and mine unless I turned over the valley to him.

"Jessie told me tonight, after you whipped him, that Jack had threatened her into a promise of marriage. He said it would be too bad for her father and mother if she didn't marry him.

"I'm telling you this now, Riley, so you'll know the facts in case I get killed. If I'm killed, all that I have is yours." Ahearn paused. Then: "Do you love my daughter, Riley? You want to marry her?"

"Yes, sir." Riley did not blush.

"Jessie has told her mother and me that she loves you. Back in Oregon I was a minister. I gave up the ministry and started ranching."

John Ahearn got out an old leather-bound Bible. The door opened and Hank Peck came in. John Ahearn had signaled the old trail boss from the window. And there in the lamplight John Ahearn married his daughter Jessie to Riley Burnett.

"I'll kiss the bride, now," old Hank Peck said, "and git back to my chores. I'm takin' the bridegroom with me. I can't exactly guarantee to send him back all in one chunk but I reckon the bride's prayers might turn the trick. You, Greasy, make that coffee with whiskers on it. We'll need somethin' strong an' hot when this ruckus is over. You stay here and ride herd on your wimmin-folks, John. Greasy Ben is a dangsight better hand with a gun than he is with a pothook. He'll be bustin' a few caps while he's waitin' fer his coffee to come to a boil. Well, let's git along, Riley."

Riley Burnett kissed his bride and stepped outside behind Hank and closed the door. It was breaking day. From somewhere behind the brush, a few hundred yards away, a .30-30 saddle carbine

cracked. The bullet whined so close to his head that Riley ducked. The slug thudded into the heavy plank door he'd just closed. Riley crouched and moved into the shadows of the heavy wild rosebushes that hid Hank.

"How you expect a man to keep his promise to that young Jessie bride if you stand up like a cigar store Injun fer a bushwhacker target?" Hank rasped. "Damnitall you take better care of that hide from now on. It belongs to her. You savvy?"

Peck had scattered his Skillet men. He and Riley stayed together. They reached the big log barn without drawing fire. Hank said the barn was the best place for them to make their stand. From there they could cut down anybody that attacked the main house. And they could guard the saddled horses inside the barn and keep from being set afoot. And they'd have their horses handy in case they had to ride out after their renegades.

BUT old Hank Peck was worried. He said they'd gotten off to a slow start. California Jack and his renegades, and Port Gardner and Red Nally, had gotten here before the Skillet outfit reached the home ranch. Those gun-slingers had been bushed-up here and waiting for daylight to line their gunsights.

"Then why didn't they bushwhack us when we rode up to the barn?"

"Because there wasn't daylight. Them fellers want to see their sights. They don't like to waste ary ca'tridge."

"Now in the graying light, loud and harsh and rasping, sounded the ugly voice of Port Gardner.

"What do you say, Red?"

"She's the purtiest li'l thing I ever seen in cowboy pants, Port."

"Git your mind off her, Red."

"Just as if she ain't on your mind, Port," Red Nally's laugh rattled.

"Along with the Ahearn ranch an' the Skillet trail herd, Red. Business afore pleasure. I'll fight you fer the pleasure of marryin' the gal when the gunsmoke clears away. Hear that comical noise somewheres, Red? That's the big curly-headed California Jack a-gnashin' his big white teeth."

"You ever see a purty feller change his looks so sudden-like? She won't give him so much as a look now. That Riley done a job on 'is purty looks. What you think of that proposition California Jack made us, Port?"

"That's somethin' else to settle when the gunsmoke clears. Me'n you had our plans made when we throwed in with the Skillet, remember, Red?"

"I ain't the fergitful kind. We had 'er made to kill off Hank Peck and Riley Burnett when we got here. Not because we got anything ag'in' 'em. But they got somethin' we want. They got the Skillet.

"Same thing concerns this Ahearn ranch. The Valley of the Little Muddy. John Ahearn won't give it up. So we got to kill a good man. Too bad. But business is business, Red."

"Me'n you is business men, Port. Hard pardners to shave in a deal. California Jack's gonna find that out, shore as he's born, Port."

"When the gunsmoke clears, Red. Till then, we need him and his two-bit renegades. And California Jack needs Port Gardner and Red Nally."

"Otherwise he wouldn't a cut us in on the deal, Port."

"That's right, Red. What do yuh say?"

"She's shore purty, Port."

"The hell with that. Light enough to line your sights, Red?"

"Light enough, Port. What are we waitin' fer?"

"California Jack. He claims he's the big ramrod. He wants to give all the orders. What's a-holdin' you back, California Jack? Your guts gone?"

"I'll show you big-mouthed Texican sons!" California Jack sounded like he was in a murderous frame of mind. "When the sign is right, I'll spit in your dead faces. All set, Fancher?"

"All set, Jack!"

"Pass it along."

Riley Burnett and Hank Peck, there inside the big log barn, heard men's voices passing along the signal.

"All set."

"All set."

"All set."

They had the ranch buildings surrounded. From the brush where the shot had been fired at Riley came the sound of California Jack's saddle carbine cracking. It was the signal to start battle.

Then in the gray dawn hell broke loose.

Guns on all sides cracked. Bullets snarled and whined. California Jack's renegades, scattered in a circle on horseback, closed the circle. Spurring, yelling, shooting.

The Skillet cowhands fought back from where they crouched on foot. Swift and hard-fought and there was no way of telling which side was winning or who was getting shot down. No sign of Gardner and Nally. That talkative pair had gone suddenly and dangerously silent.

"Port and Red," said old Hank Peck quietly, "will figger me'n you are here in the barn, son. They'll Injun up on us. Watch fer 'em!"

California Jack sat his big palomino in behind the heavy brush and shouted fighting orders to his renegades. Fancher was strawbossing them, cursing them, promising them everything, anything they wanted for prize booty.

Now and then a horse stampeded with empty saddle, stirrups flapping. The gunfire was terrific. The renegades who hadn't been shot from their saddles had quit their horses and taken to the brush and it was every man for himself and Hank Peck said he hoped the Skillet cowhands were getting what they shot at.

No sign of Port Gardner and Red Nally. California Jack still sat his horse behind the brush, playing it safe. . . .

Then, from behind the circle of gunfire came a crazy laugh, the *crack* of a saddle carbine. It was the Swede, the one man nobody had figured into their calculations. He was bushed up somewhere, smoking out California Jack, Port Gardner and Red Nally with shots that clipped the brush that hid them.

"Ride out in the open!" the Swede bellowed. "Ride out in the open and fight! I'm smokin' you out! You, Red! You, Port! You, California Jack! Git out there and fight! I'm joshin' you, Red. I'm joshin' you an' Port back for how you jobbed me a-comin' up the trail. But if you don't ride out there now, I'll quit joshin'. I kin see you. I kin kill you if I take a notion. You call me the locoed Swede! I'm locoed like a wolf! I'm a hydrophobia wolf. I'm the Swede!"

HIS shots drove California, Gardner and Nally out from behind the brush into the open. They were racing for the wide open double doors of that big log barn.

Old Hank Peck might have stayed in there and cut them down as they came. But Riley Burnett stepped out through the open door and he had his saddle gun lifted.

"That's how Cap Burnett got killed!" gritted Peck. He walked out to stand beside young Riley Burnett.

The Swede quit firing. Riley called out. His voice cracked like a bullwhip. "Pull up! Git down. Before you git a good horse shot. Show your toughness!"

Port and Red quit their saddles and came on. They had guts. And when California Jack whirled his big palomino a shot from the log house ripped past his head. And the voice of John Ahearn sounded, deep and ominous.

"Dismount, man! Don't die like a coward!"

California swung from his fancy saddle. The three stood there in the open, their six-shooters gripped tightly. Then those guns were spitting flame.

Burnett and Peck stood a little crouched and their saddle guns spat fire and they were shooting to kill. Riley felt a bullet rip his thigh. He was knocked sideways. He went down on one knee and old Hank Peck lay flat on his long, lean belly beside Riley and his eyes were squinted as he lined his sights.

Riley was shooting at California Jack. And he wasn't missing. He saw Jack double up and go down onto his knees. The big yellow-haired dude kept shooting. Riley lined his sights on the man's head and pulled the trigger. He saw Jack's head jerk and Riley knew he'd killed his first man.

Port Gardner and Red Nally were both down, mortally wounded. Greasy Ben was firing from one of the windows where he'd opened a wooden shutter. He wasn't shooting to miss. But it was old Hank Peck who used the last two cartridges in his saddle carbine to kill Gardner and Nally.

Old Hank rolled over on his side and began shoving fresh cartridges into his saddle gun. His face was gray.

Riley was shoving cartridges into his carbine magazine.

The shooting had died out. Riley and Hank lay on the ground.

"Hit bad, son?"

"Scratched, is all. How about you, Hank?"

"Nothin' that a jug of likker won't fix. And John Ahearn claims he's got a jug hid out. . . ."

Then the crazy laughter of the Swede shattered the silence. Out of the brush came the Swede. He hung his spurs in the shoulders of the big apaloosa bronc he was riding and he had a six-shooter in his hand. The big spotted-rump bronc pitched out across the clearing toward the barn.

"All dead!" The Swede's crazy laugh threw echoes back. "They're all dead! All but the Swede!"

Riley was dizzy from pain. Old Hank's face was gray as a dirty blanket. They'd both lost blood. Both were pain-racked and sick from nausea. They played possum, waiting for a shot at the Swede.

The Swede was bucking his bronc down on them. Shooting at them.

The door of the log house opened. John Ahearn stood framed in the doorway. He lifted a long deer rifle to his shoulder and squeezed the trigger.

Flame spewed from the rifle muzzle. The aim was true and deadly. The bullet tore the skull wide open. The Swede's laughter cut short. The big body toppled sideways and crashed to the ground. The riderless apaloosa bronc pitched past Peck and Riley and on through the open barn door.

"May Almighty God in His Heaven forgive me." John Ahearn put down his smoking rifle and came with long-legged strides to where Burnett and Peck lay.

The gun battle was over. Ahearn and Greasy Ben carried Riley and Hank into the house and laid them on the beds Mom Ahearn made ready. Jessie came with hot water and rolls of bandages.

The Skillet cook went out and he fetched the wounded Skillet cowhands into the bunkhouse and went to work with crude surgeon's work.

Two Skillet men had been killed. The others had come out of the ruckus with no more than flesh wounds. They said there wasn't one of California Jack's renegades alive.

Riley lay back on Jessie's bed, his three flesh wounds dressed and bandaged. Beside the bullet rip in his thigh, he had a raw crease along his ribs and a bullet-nicked shoulder. He grinned through his pain at Jessie and told her to take good care of old Hank Peck.

Tough old Peck said all he needed, now that Jessie had him patched up, was a jug of drinkin' likker and no wimmin around till he'd cussed away the pain.

"That Swede kinda spoiled the nerve of Port and Red so's they couldn't shoot too good. But they done fair to middlin'. . . ."

* * *

That was how the Skillet cattle came to stay in the Valley of the Little Muddy. John Ahearn gave Riley Burnett the top market price for the thousand head of longhorns belonging to Texas cowmen and Riley sent the money with a letter back to Texas.

"Hank Peck located me in the Valley of the Little Muddy, as he said he would," Riley wrote back to the Texas cowmen who had put their trust in Hank Peck and Riley Burnett. "My father-in-law bought your cattle. I got married to the finest girl on earth the first night we spent here in the valley. Her mom is the best cook in the world. John Ahearn, my father-in-law, reminds me of my own father. Not so much in looks. But the way he is made inside. Hank Peck sends his best regards."

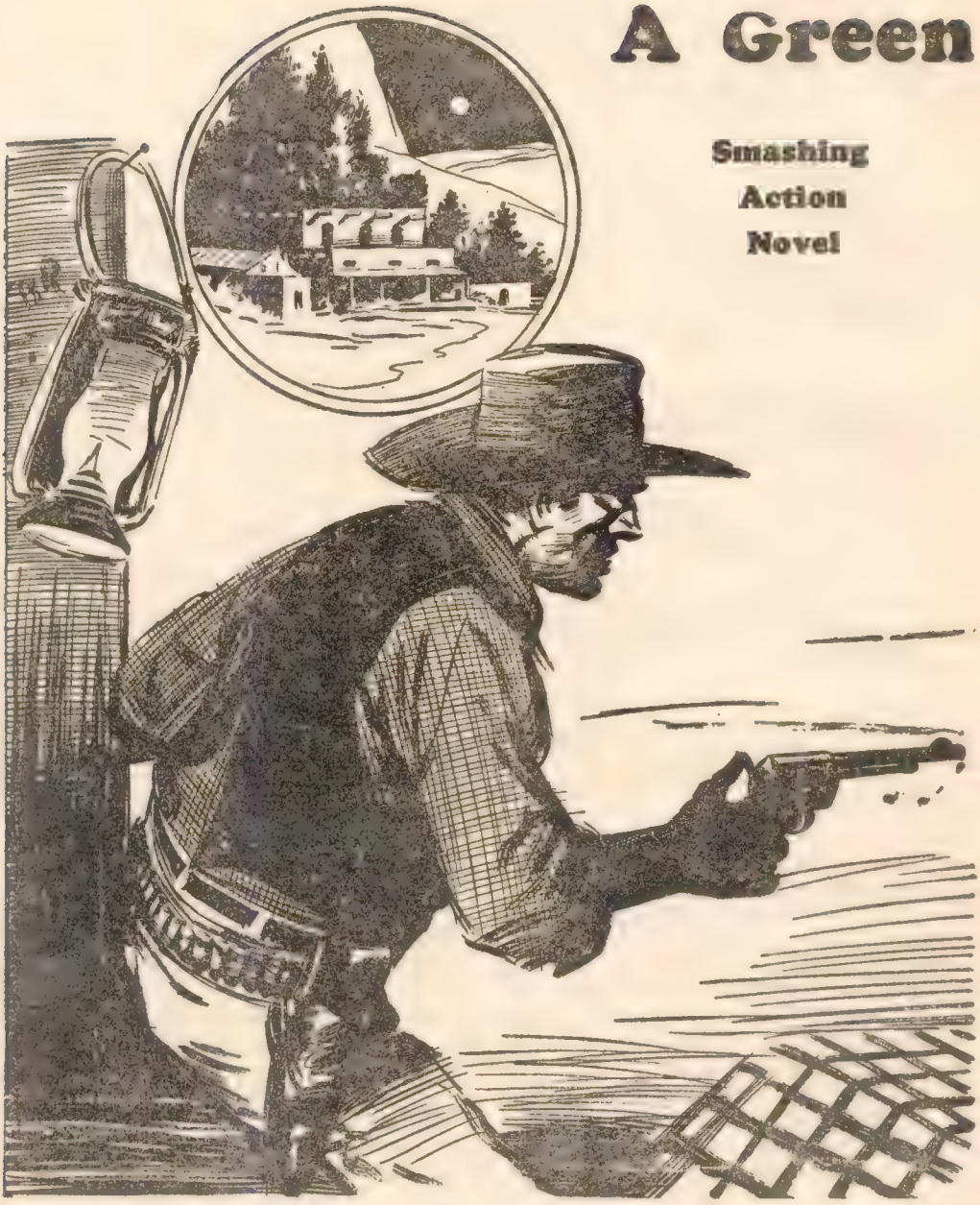
And that was how the Skillet brand from the Texas Panhandle came to stay in the Valley of the Little Muddy in Montana. . . .

THE END

BUY ALL
THE SAVINGS BONDS
YOU CAN!

# A Green

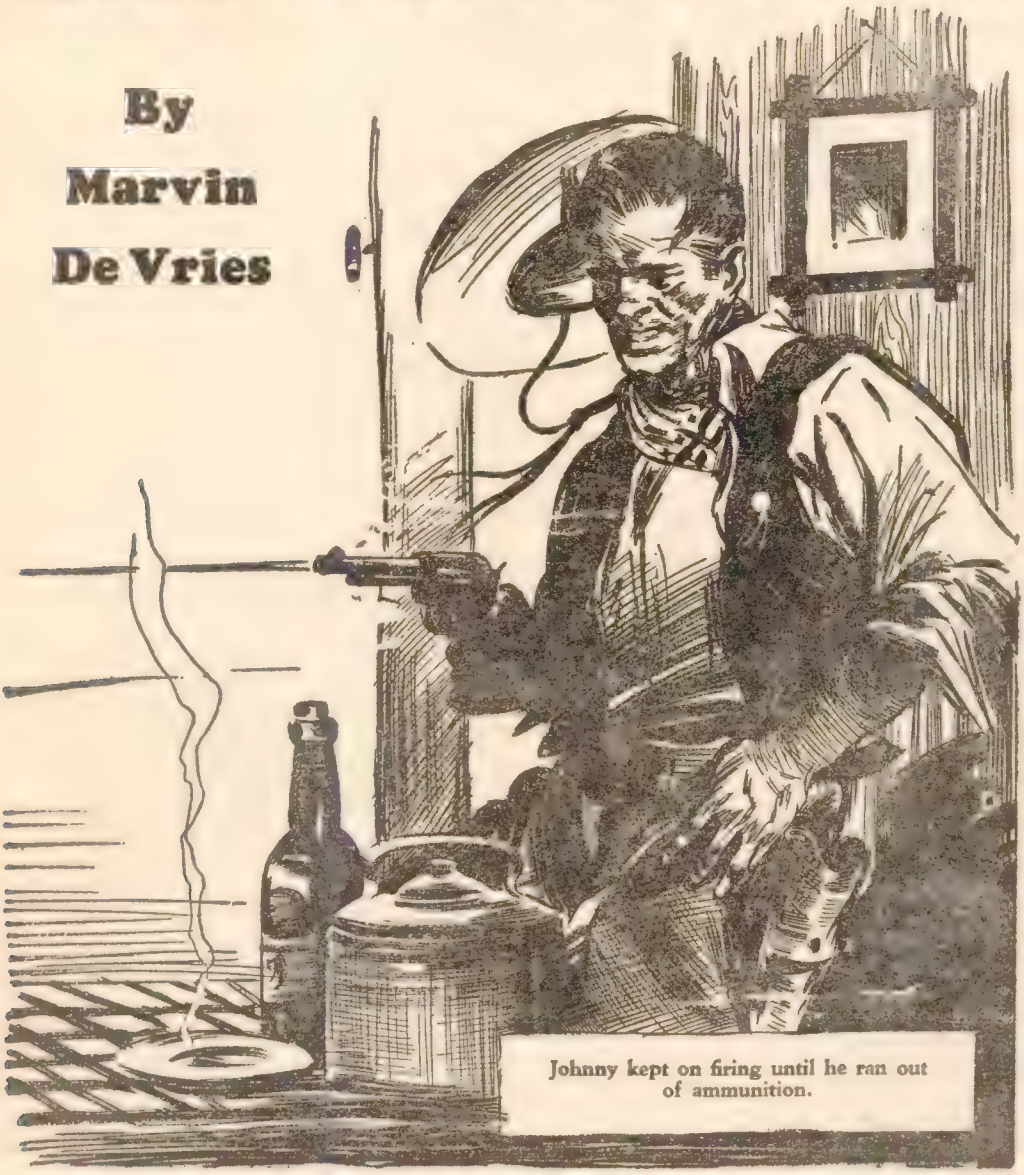
**Smashing Action Novel**



Johnny Peblo swore to God that they wouldn't hang his brother, not so long as Johnny's sixguns could blaze a trail to freedom through a hell-slew of living dead men; or so long as Johnny could wrap that law's grim noose around his own neck—and dance the hangman's prance himself!

# Hand for Murder Ranch

**By Marvin De Vries**



Johnny kept on firing until he ran out of ammunition.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Gallows Galahad

CIRCUIT Judge Tram Montreaux read the sentence from a piece of paper that lay on the desk in front of him. He gave the impression that it was simply a routine string of words someone had laced together for him to read. He spat them from his lips as if he were finding pieces of them here and there in

his teeth. He never once looked at the prisoner, but when he was through Randy Peblo was gallows bait, proved guilty of the killing of Jonas Hyacinth, and sentenced to be hanged for the crime two weeks hence.

When it was over, Johnny Peblo's fingers twisted and his face went white, although he wasn't surprised. He had been trying to brace himself for it ever since the trial. He was eighteen years old. His brother, Randy, was only seventeen. Between them they had hardly used up a half a life's span. Johnny had once seen a horse thief hanged, so he knew how it went. Probably that was why it seemed to hit him harder than it did Randy.

Sheriff Coglan took Randy away, but Johnny didn't move. He was too stunned to. The horse thief danced on air again before his eyes and made him sick to his stomach.

"I'll tell you one thing, Judge," he said suddenly, probably not even realizing he was speaking aloud, "he ain't going to hang."

"I wish I could stop it, son."

"I'll stop it. Those three Hyacinth punchers lied."

Buck Holzer, who had been Jonas Hyacinth's foreman, and who still ran the place on court order, gave the judge a look, then moved toward Johnny. "What d'you say we go outside and git some air, Johnny," he urged.

"I don't need any air."

"Come on!"

Buck was big and rough, with straight black hair like an Indian's. There wasn't much slap and dash about him, but Johnny knew he was fair and honest, and he could see something in Buck's eyes that he didn't expect to see anywhere on the Hyacinth side. There was sympathy there, and something more: a realization, possibly, that what the Court had so solemnly declared—that Randy Peblo had killed Jonas Hyacinth—might not be true at all.

Johnny got to his feet and walked out with him. The street had a fagged-out look, as if the late autumn heat had given it one beating too many. A few loafers kept to the shade of Sol Keep's gallery. Sam Carpenter, who had figured in the trial, watched them pass behind his store window, but tried to avoid being seen.

"You think Mitch Shone, and Joe Jack, and Jesse Fell lied, don't you, kid?" Buck remarked, his thumbs stuck in his pants belt, elbows catching air on both sides of him, feet scraping at each step.

"I know they lied."

"I've talked it over with them, Johnny. You're wrong."

"That's what the jury seemed to think."

"You aim to carry this any further?"

"How could I? I ain't got any money."

"How much did you pay Shimm?"

"Fifty dollars. That's what I earned from my round-up job on the Lazy B."

"That ain't a helluva lot of money for a lawyer."

"When it's all you got, it's a lot. I don't grudge it to him, though."

"If you had the cash it might be a good idea to get another lawyer somewhere—a good man." Buck looked straight ahead. He meant to say the bushwhacker who had killed Jonas Hyacinth had ten thousand dollars loot to show for it, and if Johnny knew where it was, it would be a good idea to spend it on a lawyer and an appeal.

"Yeah," Johnny agreed, without any show of anger, "it might be a good idea."

Buck didn't speak again. His horse was at the hitch rack in front of the Fulsom House. Johnny waited while he untied the animal and mounted. Buck lifted his hand and swung off for the country, leaving Johnny Peblo to face the bitter days that lay ahead.

TWO WEEKS add up to fourteen days. For some people they make a holiday. For some, like Randy Peblo, a lifetime. For Johnny they made a nightmare; a nightmare of high stone walls he couldn't climb with his thoughts, of dazed spells when he couldn't think at all. His was a nightmare of days that spun off into limbo like spooked horses until he could have screamed to make them stop.

He had testified at the trial, accounting for all of Randy's time the day Jonas Hyacinth was killed. But the jury hadn't believed him because the three Hyacinth riders, Mitch Shone, Jesse Fell and the Chickasaw breed, Joe Jack, had told a different story. They had lied, and their lies were sending his kid brother to the gallows.

Johnny realized now that old Larkin

Shimm wasn't worth his salt as a lawyer. He had lapses of memory, and, sometimes, at the end of one of the long harangues he was fond of making, he would forget what he had gotten up to say in the first place. Frequently, Johnny had had to prod him to keep him awake, and he was so deaf he missed most of what went on. Whenever Johnny noticed it he would repeat in a loud voice what had been said, and then Shimm would get provoked and insist he wasn't deaf. A lot of the spectators had been inclined to laugh, but Johnny usually glared them down.

He had expected the trial to last at least a week, but it had been over in a day because Shimm couldn't take hold of it, and get his teeth into it, and make the truth come out. He hadn't cross-examined the three Hyacinth riders. He hadn't called up any witnesses to say how reliable and steady Randy was.

In the dead of night, Johnny lay on his bunk, and wild thoughts and wilder schemes swirled through his head. He reconciled himself to Shimm's poor show, but the fact remained that Randy hadn't killed Hyacinth, and he wasn't going to hang for something he hadn't done. That was the law, too. I got the right on my side," he told himself. "Only I'm the only one who knows it. So it's up to me to figure out some way to bust him out of that jail."

It was a thought he finally had to lay aside because it just wouldn't work. The Hobart County jail wasn't a place a man busted open by his lonesome. It couldn't be done. He was willing to take any kind of a chance for himself, but he knew he would get filled full of lead before he could do Randy a particle of good, and the hanging would go on, regardless.

It was terrifying the way time ran out, by night and day, and no one could hold it back. It put a lump in his stomach that never went away. The day he had told Buck Holzer Randy would never hang seemed only yesterday, but the sure conviction with which he had spoken had dwindled to a thin, shrill voice, battering weakly against the growing fear that screamed in his heart.

Another plan floundered around in his mind like a blind horse in a cactus patch, bumping into objection after objection, but gradually clearing a path he could follow to a certain point. It was the one he finally settled on, and when he went to see Randy that day he told him a little about it.

"I got a plan, Randy. I don't know if it'll work, but I'm going to try it."

Randy was dark and thin, like Johnny himself, and thoughts spilled out of his eyes like pictures for all to see. "There's only two days left, Johnny," Randy said slowly.

"I know it," his brother told him. "I got to get busy on this, Randy. I can't cut it too fine, because there are some things about it I can't figure on in advance. I got to go at it blind, and I don't know how much time it'll take."

"What are you going to do, Johnny—try to bust me out?"

"No, I can't, Randy. I thought that out."

Randy nodded. "That's what I was going to tell you."

"This is different, Randy, Them Hyacinth punchers lied, and you and I know it. I aim to get the truth out of them on my own."

"How?"

"I don't know. I've been fixin' pop's hogleg. It's kinda rusty but it'll work. I got cartridges. So I'm goin' out there to the Hyacinth place and see what I can do."

"You think I ought to count on it?"

"I don't know, Randy—" his voice suddenly grew unsteady, "I—don't know. And I can't figure the time, so if I don't get here tomorrow you'll know what I'm up to. It might be I won't git back a-tall. Cin you hang onto yourself, Randy, all by your lonesome?"

"I—I guess so," his brother said. "But I don't know how things will go, after I get up there on the trap."

"I spoken to Parson Diehl. He said he'd stand up with you, and say a prayer, if it comes to that. That's the way pa an' ma would like it if they was here to have a say. I told the sheriff, and he says it's okay."

"I s'pose there'll be a lot of people."

"I s'pose so, Randy." Johnny choked again, and tears came to his eyes. He leaned his head against the bars and Randy touched it, his long, smooth fingers brushing his cheeks.

"Just don't go jumpin' into a beartrap on

my account," Randy Peblo told him.

"I won't, Randy, no more than I got to, but you ain't goin' to . . . " His voice started off, clear and convincing, the way it had sounded that day in court after everybody had cleared out, and he had told the judge Randy wouldn't hang. But it bogged down now, and clogged in his throat, and he let the words hang on the elge of that awful abyss that yawned at Randy's feet, because it suddenly dawned on him that, possibly, his was only an empty brag.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Sixgun Third Degree

THE HYACINTH ranch was big. It neighbored the Lazy B where Johnny had worked the beef round-up, so he knew the crew. He understood Jonas Hyacinth had kin in the east, and Buck Holzer was keeping the place going by court order until kinfolk appeared.

It was near midnight when he rode into the ranchyard. There wasn't a light showing anywhere. Johnny dismounted and headed for Buck Holzer's quarters, a small adobe building fifty feet past the bunkhouse. He pounded on the door and Buck came out, grumbling, but when he saw who it was his grumbling stopped.

"I've been thinking about you, Johnny," he remarked, stepping back inside and striking a match. "I ain't seen you for quite a while."

Johnny followed him in and waited until he got the lantern lit. Buck looked huge and clumsy in his long, baggy underwear. His eyes were bleary with sleep, his hair tousled any which way, and wrinkles crisscrossed his face where he had bored into his pillow.

"Cripes," he muttered suddenly, it's twelve o'clock!"

"I know it," Johnny said.

"Kinda late for you and me to be around."

"I fixed it so I wouldn't get here any earlier.

"What d'you want, Johnny?"

"I want you to pull on your pants and come along with me."

"Where?"

"To the bunkhouse. I've got something to say to every damn one of your riders."

"About the trial?"

"Yeah."

Buck frowned, glancing at Johnny's hogleg, then at his own weapon in its holster on the wall. "With your mouth, Johnny, or with that gun?"

"That depends."

"What d'you want to do, try to get something out of Mitch and Jesse and Joe Jack?"

"Yeah."

"Joe Jack ain't here. I seen him head for town around dark."

Johnny was disappointed. He had waited until midnight so the whole crew would be in the bunkhouse, but he had to go through with it regardless. "He'll probably come in later," he said. "You better get your clothes on."

Buck shrugged and pulled on his trousers, shirt and boots. "You mind if I take my gun?"

"Leave it here."

Buck shrugged again and, with the lantern in his hand, went outside. Johnny followed, letting his breath go as if he had just run a race. Buck could have put up a fight, one way or another, and spoiled his plans, then and there. But Johnny had a hunch Buck wanted to give him a chance to get to the bottom of what was bothering him.

"Just go easy with that gun, Johnny," Buck told him at the bunkhouse door. "That's all I ask."

"I won't use it except to hold my own, that's all."

Buck opened the door quietly and hung his lantern on a peg near the door. A row of holstered guns hung on a two-by-four nearby. Johnny took them all and carried them to a far corner where they would be out of reach. Then he went past the bunks, looking for more. Charlie Kepp, who had a poisonous disposition, was the only one who had taken his weapon to bed with him. He came awake when Johnny reached for it.

"Damnation!" he snarled. "Leave that smoke-iron alone!"

Johnny swung the holstered gun over his arm.

Charlie got to his feet and made a lunge. Johnny moved back. The belt fell to the floor. Before Johnny could recover it,

Charlie had the gun in his hand, and he was madder than a hornet.

"Now what the hell's goin' on here?" he demanded.

"Hold it, Charlie, for God's sake!" Buck yelled.

"Git outa here!" Charlie roared at Johnny. "Travel!" He swung the gun threateningly and tried to get off a shot. Johnny knocked the gun to one side and the bullet snicked through the north window. Charlie let out a roar and tried another shot, but before he got it off, Johnny fired. The bullet struck Charlie's six and knocked it to the floor. Charlie let out a wild howl and doubled up, squeezing his arm.

BUCK Holzer rushed in with an angry roar. "That's enough," he snapped, giving Johnny a shove. "I gave you a break, kid, but I won't stand for anything like that."

The shot brought everybody to their feet. "What's going on here?" Kyle Sermon growled, scratching his belly. "My God, I like to jumped through the roof!"

"I told you, Buck, I mean to hold my own, and that's all I'm doing," Johnny stated. "I know you gave me a break, but it wasn't enough. I told you I was going whole-hog on this, and everybody might as well know it right now." He scooped up Charlie's gun, and stuck it in his belt.

"I won't have any more gun-play around here," Buck growled.

"You tell that to your men."

"I want a doctor," Charlie Kepp yelped.

His hand was bleeding. Johnny figured the bullet had cut in between the thumb and forefinger, and singed his palm, but he didn't try to get a look. He kept out of their reach so no one could jump him.

"Let's see it," Buck said without much sympathy.

"Looks like he cleaned us outa guns," Orlie Spane remarked with a wry look at the empty gun rack.

"What in hell you up to, Johnny?" Bud Hally sputtered.

"You better all git your pants on," Johnny advised.

"The hell with you!" Bud shot back. "I'm going back to bed."

"Get over there along the wall, with or without your pants then. I've got something to say." He whipped his gun sideways.

"All right! All right," Hally growled. "But I will say you picked a helluva time to make a speech."

"I came late on purpose so you'd all be here."

"Well, we ain't. Joe Jack's in town on a bender."

One by one the rest of the riders lined up along the wall, and Johnny told them as briefly as he could what he was up to. "Three of you—Mitch Shone, Joe Jack, and Jesse Fell—were witnesses at the trial. Mitch, you claimed you told Randy Jonas was coming home that day with cattle money. You said you told Randy he had ten thousand cash on him, and you meant to see he got it safe home."

"Well, that's true. Sure I did." Mitch had a front tooth missing, and it made his words hiss out, especially when he got excited. His eyes were narrow and his cheeks bulged, and he walked as if someone had recently kicked him in the tail. He wasn't much for looks, but Buck Holzer considered him a top hand.

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"You said you saw Randy ride out of town just before the stage came in. I know that's a lie because Randy and I were together the whole day, and most of the night with a cow that couldn't calf, and she died on us before morning."

"I don't know anything about that," Mitch answered.

"That's what I told the jury, and what I said was true—so what you and Jesse and Joe Jack said can't be."

"The jury believed us, Kid," Jesse Fell stated. "We wouldn't have any reason for lyin' about something like that, and you would." Jesse was shorter and stockier than Mitch. He held his head a little to one side as though he had a permanent kink in his neck. He had eye-trouble of some kind that left a rim of red around the lids.

"I know when I'm lying and when I ain't, and I know what I said was true. So do you. You say I had a reason for lying, and I say you did. That's what I'm here to find out—why you lied."

"You won't find out from me. You must be off your nut. I never saw such a fool move like you're pullin' in all my life."

"What about that shoe string the sheriff found?" Mitch Shone put in. "Randy admitted himself it was his'n."

"It was his'n, but somebody put it there where the sheriff found it, to plant the killing on Randy."

Mitch laughed. "I s'pose that was me, and Jesse, and Joe Jack?"

"Was it?"

"For Cripes sake, kid, be yourself."

THE STORY built up against Randy at the trial was an old one now. Jonas Hyacinth had come in on the five o'clock stage from Kupp's Station. Mitch, Jesse and Joe Jack had met him at the depot in accordance with instructions they had received from Jonas by mail, and the four men had immediately set out for the home ranch. The bushwhacker had made his stand along Williwaw Wash, over toward the north end where the rimrock crowds in close. His first shot brought down the horse Jonas was riding, and threw him to the ground. Mitch had testified that it was impossible to see anything, because it was near dark, and the bushwhacker was on the dark side of the wash. Jonas had tried to get the saddle bags out from under the dead animal, but a second shot from the rimrock caught him in the back and bored a hole clear through him. He was probably dead before he hit the ground.

On the stand, Jesse testified, as follows: "I asked the coyote what he wanted us to do. He said one of us was to get down, and get the saddle bags, and fetch 'em to the wall. I did it. He had a rope let down, and I tied the bags with the money in them to the rope like he told me, and he pulled 'em up."

Asked if he had seen the bushwhacker, Jesse testified: "I did. I seen he wore a mask. I looked up along the rope and seen it. As a matter of fact, I seen his face, because when he was looking down the mask come off, but I couldn't make out exactly who it was. Leastways, I wouldn't want to say, because it was going on dark, and it was hard to see. I ain't got good eyes anyway, and I wouldn't want to make a mistake about something like that. When he got the bags pulled up he let us go on. As you know, we cut back when we could git out of the wash, and went to town and told the sheriff."

Sheriff Mike Coglan had testified: "I found the mask at the foot of the ledge the next morning. It was a home-made affair. He used a piece of wore-out shoe string to tie the thing around the back of his head. That was the reason he lost it. The shoe string broke and the thing fell down."

Old man Carpenter, of Carpenter's Mercantile, testified Randy had bought some new shoe strings in his store the day Jonas was killed. He remembered it distinctly. Randy had bought the shoe strings, and gone outside and sat down on the gallery and changed them. Randy didn't deny it. In fact, he admitted that the shoe string on the mask was the same shoe string he had taken out of his shoes. He said he could tell by the knots he had tied in them before he got around to getting new ones. But he said he had thrown the old ones away, and if anyone had picked them up and made the mask, he couldn't help it. He hadn't done any such thing.

That was the story Johnny had to break down. And build up, in its place, another one, if he meant to save Randy from dancing on air like he had seen the horse thief do. It was a hard, bitter chore, and his

stomach twisted into a tight, anxious knot, because the last grain of time might run out too soon....

Buck Holzer found some bandage and wrapped it around Charlie's hand. In spite of Charlie's complaints, it probably wasn't a bad wound, but Johnny let him sit down and hold his hand in his lap. He kept the rest of them lined up along the wall, not to make it any harder for them, but only to spare himself any unnecessary risk.

"What're you going to do, Johnny?" Kyle Sermon inquired with a sardonic grin. "Just make us stand here chewin' our cud till somebody starts to spout the truth, the whole truth, and nothin' but the truth?"

"Yes."

"Right up until the hanging?"

"Yes."

"But that ain't until Thursday morning. You mean you're going to make us stand here the rest of the night, and all day tomorrow, and all the next night, too?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Kyle muttered, half grinning at this." Kyle had a gray powder-burn the size of a dime on one cheek. He looked indolent and unexcitable. All the men liked him. Buck was the only one who knew he had a crooked past he was trying to live down. "Suppose," he went on, "nobody starts to spout?"

"What would you do?"

Kyle laughed. "I'd be giving you ideas, kid."

"I don't think so. I've been thinkin' this over for some time, you know."

"I see," Kyle said soberly.

MITCH and Jesse stared blankly. "You start blowin' off that damned hawleg at me," Mitch bellowed, "and I'll—I'll—"

"You'll what?"

"Now just a minute," Buck Holzer broke in. "Mitch, you shut up. Johnny, we got work to do tomorrow."

"I reckon it cin wait."

"But this ain't legal, Johnny," Buck pleaded. "You'll land in the pen yourself."

"Mebbe so."

"He sounds like he don't give a damn," Orlie Spane put in.

"All I want to know is why Mitch and Jesse and Joe Jack lied to that jury."

"We didn't, for Pete's sake," Jesse roared. Then he tamed down, and added soberly, "Randy's pullin' the wool over your eyes, Johnny. Just because he's your brother, you think he couldn't do anything like that, but the facts are against him."

"I saw with my own eyes where he was all day," Johnny said. "He couldn't have been two places at the same time."

"Oh, Cripes!" Buck muttered disgustedly.

All Johnny Peblo accomplished in the first few hours was to get everybody irritated. The grins faded and angry scowls strode across the line of faces. Charlie Kepp began to cuss in a steady stream. Cy Whitaker, tow-headed as his brother was dark, started calling Johnny names in a venomous, rumbling voice, and Duke Munger picked his teeth with concentrated fury, as if he meant to poke them all out by the roots.

"All right," Mitch Shone finally bellowed, "I lied. I lied like hell." He winked at Buck. "It ain't none of it true what I said at the trial. Now put up your damned gun and let's get out of here."

"What was the truth?" Johnny asked soberly.

"How should I know?" Mitch exploded, his anger rising. "I'm just a cowpuncher. I ain't a lawyer. Go back to old Shimm for that."

Johnny didn't answer and he didn't move.

"We both lied," Jesse chimed in, with another wink. "Does that satisfy you?"

"It will when you say it and mean it."

"I don't believe that hawleg'll shoot straight," Kyle Sermon remarked. "Let's rush him."

"It will," Johnny said. "I been workin' on it."

"I don't know what he was shootin' at," Charlie Kepp put in, "but he sure raised hell with my hand."

"Where'd you git it, anyway, Johnny?" Bud Hally asked.

"It was pa's."

"The one he used to have to use both hands to shoot off?" Whitaker snickered.

Johnny kept silent.

"He ain't talkin' no more," Kyle Sermon informed them. "Come on, Johnny, speak up. Don't go sulky on us."

"That's your pa's pants you're wearin', too, ain't they?" Cy inquired with another snicker. "What'd you do—plant him without pants?"

"Your pop sure did well by you boys, didn't he?" Orlie Spane said.

Johnny felt the blood rush to his face, but if they were trying to taunt him into a flare-up, it didn't work. Buck himself finally stopped them with an angry mutter. "You make me sick to my stomach, Cy, you know that? I never knowed you were such a two-bit geezer."

"Listen, Buck," Orlie Spane flared, "we're only tryin' to break this up. If you figure you can do it, go ahead, I want to git back to bed."

"I'll shoot any man who tries anything," Johnny warned flatly. "You rush me, or anything like that, and I'll dish it out—first come, first served."

"Why not let the rest of us go, and you can go to work on Mitch and Jesse. Then when Joe Jack gets back, you cin have him, too. You cin go to work on 'em all you please." This was Buck's suggestion.

"No," Johnny answered it.

"Why, ain't that fair?"

"Maybe it's fair, but it's too risky for me."

"You can't hold out, kid."

"I'll hold out."

There was one thing that wouldn't hold out, though, not even until morning light, and that was the lantern Buck had hung on a peg near the door. Orlie Spane probably noticed it first, and realized what it meant. He mentioned it to Kyle Sermon, and the news went up and down the line like wildfire.

"When she burns out, we'll make a dive for our guns, and that'll be the end of this," Kyle said in a low voice. "Everybody git set, but don't make a move till I say the word. Then go for your guns, and let him have it."

Buck Holzer stood a little apart, nearer Charlie Kepp and Pete Harp, the Hyacinth cook, and didn't get in on the talk. Johnny noticed it, especially the elaborate pretense that nothing was going on. He wracked his brains trying to figure out what they were up to, but he couldn't settle on anything special, unless they were talking about Joe Jack's return, and planning to make some kind of play when he showed up. Johnny was anxious to see Jack, too.

The light became dimmer. The chimney began to smoke over, showing the coal oil was exhausted. The flame lost its bright flare and became smudged and irregular. The wick was burning down. When it reached the edge of the slot the flame would snuff out.

Johnny was too intent on his chore to notice it. But Buck finally saw it and he probably heard enough of what Kyle was saying to put the two together.

"I'll warn you again," Johnny stated with growing uneasiness. "I ain't fooling about this, and if anyone tries to jump me I'll shoot. Don't anybody try anything when Joe Jack gets back either. Remember, you've got to cover thirty feet before you can get to me, and I'll start shooting the minute you start moving."

Buck Holzer answered him. "That's big talk, Johnny," he jeered, "but there's one thing you didn't figure on." Orlie tried to catch Buck's eye, and stop him, but Buck wouldn't look. "In about two jerks," he went on, "that lantern's going to peter out, and when it does you better be ready to pull out fast."

## CHAPTER THREE

### Man Stampede

KYLE SERMON cussed savagely. "What's wrong with you?" Buck demanded innocently. "He—"

"You throwed in with him, that's what's wrong."

"Me?"

"We had it all set to jump him the minute the light gave out, and then you had to go blow off your big mouth."

"I had no idea," Buck stated blandly.

"The hell you didn't!"

"Orlie," Johnny broke in, "get that extra lantern going. Be quick about it."

"Do it yourself," Orlie fired back.

"Do what he says," Buck snapped. "I'm not going to have a lot of blind gunplay going on in here."

"Okay—Okay." A malicious grin spread across Orlie's face. He winked at Kyle, then dawdled past the bunks toward the lantern, taking his time. Johnny moved back as Orlie came in closer. "I won't jump you, kid," Orlie said jeeringly.

"Don't git worried. Jest take it easy!"

"Get the lantern lit."

Orlie fumbled leisurely through his pockets for a match, then announced at the end of a long search that he didn't have any. The other lantern sputtered dangerously and almost went out. "Here's a match, Orlie," Kyle said. "Shall I give it to him, Johnny?"

"All right—but watch your step."

Kyle moved forward. Johnny probably didn't watch him close enough. His immediate concern about the light drew him off-guard for a second. Orlie's intentional fumbling and dawdling galled him, and it was Orlie he was watching. When he glanced up again, Kyle was rushing him from one side and the line along the wall was breaking up and coming at him.

"Get back!" Johnny yelled.

It didn't stop Kyle Sermon. Head down he charged straight at Johnny and hit him in the mid-riff. Johnny let out a sudden grunt and went spinning back. The light went out. Kyle's arms closed around him. Johnny lifted the big gun, and struck out. It sounded like it caught Kyle across the face. He struck a second blow that made a sharp crackling sound, and, this time, Kyle wilted in his tracks and went down to the floor.

"Hold it, everybody," Buck roared at the top of his voice. "Stand where you are. Light that lantern, Orlie."

This time Orlie obeyed without any more delay. Buck strode forward. "I don't know what the hell you're thinkin' about," he muttered.

"We could've got him," Bud Hally grumbled.

"Maybe you could. But it seems to me you'd stop and think how many he'd get before it was over. Where's Jesse?"

"He went out the window."

"He did?" Buck looked at Johnny and frowned. "I guess that does it, kid. He'll fetch the sheriff and I hope you don't plan to get into a ruckus with him."

Jesse was probably saddling a horse right now, but Johnny didn't see any way to stop him.

"There he goes, kid," Mitch Shone jeered suddenly. "Listen."

Johnny heard the hoofbeats fading away. It cut his time shorter. Jesse could be back with the law in three or four hours, if that was what he was up to. In the meantime, he had only Mitch to work on, if he was going to do any more for Randy.

Buck got down and turned Kyle over. There was a welt across his face and his scalp was cut open. Buck took considerable time but finally he got to his feet and moved back along the wall. Then, grim and taut, he turned to face Johnny again. "The fat's in the fire now, son," he said. "Kyle's dead."

It hit Johnny like a blow. The angry rumble of the crew beat at him like a wave. He shuddered visibly and gulped in air. "I——I can't help it," he got out finally. "I warned him. I told him I wouldn't hold myself accountable. I don't know why he wanted to butt in, anyway. It's none of his affair. Unless you're all in on it together."

"How do you mean that?" Orlie snapped angrily.

"Jonas had ten thousand dollars cash. Where did that go?"

"S'pose you tell me."

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"I wonder if Jesse actually pulled out to git the sheriff?" Mitch muttered.

"Why wouldn't he?" Buck demanded.

"Oh, I dunno," Mitch answered, suddenly uneasy.

"Where else you think he'd go?"

Mitch didn't say. He stared at Kyle a long time, then turned on Johnny. "You realize you're goin' to stretch rope yourself for this?"

Johnny didn't answer.

"What were you trying to get at a minute ago?" Buck demanded. "You got any reason for saying anything like that?"

"Like what?"

"That we split that cattle money between us."

"Why shouldn't I figure that way? Three of your men lied, and you're sticking with 'em."

"You ain't proved they lied."

Johnny realized bleakly that it was true. So far, he hadn't proved anything. And Mitch, all by his lonesome, would be a hard nut to crack. He kept his mind off Kyle Sermon all he could. What Mitch had said was true. He was gallows bait himself now, and he didn't want to try to face that until he had done all he could for Randy.

THE talk dribbled away. Here and there a man built himself a quirly and lit up. The gray light of morning started to seep in through the broken window. Slowly, grudgingly, the dark gave way, and objects began to take shape outside.

"You goin' to let me outa here to rustle some grub?" Pete Harp asked.

"No."

"I'll guarantee I won't go no furthern the cook shack."

"No, I can't do it," Johnny stated, ignoring the rumble of protest that flared out at him.

The Chickasaw breed hand, Joe Jack, rode in by full light. He was staggering drunk, but he stripped his horse and gave it a drink at the water tank before he floundered toward the bunkhouse.

Johnny met him at the door, meaning to get his gun before he could make any use of it, but Joe Jack's holster was empty and Johnny didn't stop him.

He staggered toward his bunk and didn't seem to notice anything unusual going on.

"Where you been all night?" Buck demanded angrily. He stared hard at the man.

Joe Jack laughed briefly. "I been in jail, Buck," he remarked, grabbing for the wall. "The sheriff throwed me in jail."

"Why?"

"I had a fight with Parley Prince. That damn' tinhorn give me a trimming and I got mad."

"Where'd you get cash to buck Parley Prince?"

"Oh, I had it."

"How much?"

"Five hunnert dollars."

"You're a liar. Where's your gun?"

"I give it to Randy Peblo."

"What?" Buck grabbed him by the arm and shook him. "What's that you said?"

"Leave me alone!" Joe Jack snarled.

Johnny's face was white. "What'd he say?"

"He says he give Randy a gun."

Joe Jack gave Johnny a hard stare and finally recognized him. "Yeah," he repeated. "I give your kid brother my gun."

"What'd you do that for?" Johnny demanded.

"I give him a chance to bust out. Ain't that all right?"

"I don't know why you had to butt into this?"

"I didn't want to see him hang."

"Why didn't you think of that at the trial?"

"Yeah," Joe Jack said, suddenly dead sober, "why didn't I?"

"How'd you manage to get a gun to him?" Buck demanded.

"I put on an act, playin' drunk so the sheriff would run me in. He tooken mine offn me, but I had another hid down my pants leg, and I slid it along the floor to Randy's cell."

"What'd he do with it?"

"He hid it in his bunk. Toward morning, the sheriff seen I was sobered up and let me go."

"But he didn't give you your gun back?"

"No."

"You're drunk enough now."

"I got a bottle of booze after I got out."

Buck strode back and forth, his thumbs in his pants' belt, a frown on his face, his black hair bristling down over his forehead. Occasionally he glared at Johnny, then back at Joe Jack. Finally he stopped again and propped his fist under Joe Jack's

chin. "What time did he let you go?"

"It was gettin' light. I don't know just what time it was."

"Did you see anything of Jesse Fell?"

"No, I didn't see him."

"Wasn't he at the sheriff's office. He had enough time to get there."

"Hell, no, he wasn't there."

Buck looked at his crew, then started pacing back and forth again.

"Jesse sure took his time gettin' to the sheriff," Orlie Spane remarked. "What d'you make of it, Mitch?"

"How would I know?" Mitch snarled. "Why d'you ask me?"

"Just tryin' to make some sense outa this," Orlie answered. "That's all, Mitch."

BUCK went back to Joe Jack. "So you didn't want to see Randy Peblo hang?" he remarked.

Joe Jack ignored the question. "I—I got to git some sleep, Buck. I got to git some sleep."

"Answer me." Buck propped up his chin again.

Joe Jack jerked away. "Let me sleep. I ain't slept in two weeks."

"No? Why just exactly two weeks?"

"Goddlemighty, Buck—"

"Because you lied at the trial, and you can't take it, isn't that it?"

Joe Jack's head slumped. Buck slapped him across the face. "Brace up, and do some fast talking, man. I want to hear it. Johnny, tell this buzzard what you want to know."

Johnny moved forward a little. The whole crew watched him, silently, wearily, knowing that what he had claimed, and what he had been fighting for, was about to come out into the open. "I want to know why he lied," Johnny said.

"And I," Buck added, "want to know who killed Jonas Hyacinth—you hear me?"

Joe Jack got to his feet. The ravages of booze, or, more likely, the mental turmoil that had gnawed at him so long showed in his face. He had a haggard, gray look under the brown of his halfbreed skin. His bloodshot eyes had a desperate look that his half-way measures to save Randy Peblo from the gallows hadn't been able to assuage. But, gradually, as he stood there, and pulled himself together, the harried look vanished, and something that made him look like a first-class man took its place.

"You'd think I could take it bettern anybody else," he started off, "especially because I'm a breed, and I've been pushed around, and taken a lot of things that stuck in my craw, so I feel like I don't owe nobody very much. But I can't let a thing like this go on. It's gettin' too close—so I'll tell you the whole thing." He took a long breath, and braced himself again, spreading his feet a little, twitching his shoulders.

Buck motioned Johnny to come in closer. Orlie Spane held up his hand when one of the men carelessly made a noise. A breath of air came in the broken window and fanned Johnny's face. He noticed that the sun was beginning to touch the barn roof outside. He caught a glimpse of his horse, hipshot and scrawny, at the corral. His gun sagged in his hand and hung limp. He was sure that what Joe Jack had to say would save his brother, Randy, from the gallows. And when the breed had said his piece, and he got back to town with the news, then he could start worrying about what had happened to Kyle Sermon. He stopped a short distance off and waited.

"Go ahead, Joe Jack," Buck said.

Joe Jack nodded, and went on again, "This is how it was—" He stopped again, his eyes whipping toward the window. Then a gun roared and the bullet struck Joe Jack between the eyes. His head flopped, he buckled at the waist, his knees gave way and he sank to the floor.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### No Food for the Rope

"GIT a gun, Mitch, an' keep 'em covered." Jesse Fell stood at the window, the smoking gun that had downed Joe Jack in his hand. "Drop yore gun, Peblo."

Johnny let his gun slide to the floor. There was an empty feeling in the pit of his stomach. Buck Holzer knew his story was beginning to make sense. The whole Hyacinth crew knew it. If Joe Jack had had his chance to talk, Johnny would have been ready to ride to town with his story right now. But now Jesse had the bulge. and he might try to pin Johnny down until it was too late. Once Randy Peblo was

hanged, the law would be satisfied, and Jesse Fell would have a better chance to get in the clear.

"Go on, Mitch, git goin'," Jesse prodded. "There's no use beatin' around the bush any more."

Mitch wiped his sweating face and pulled away from the rest of the crew, moving toward the corner where Johnny had dumped the guns when he first came into the bunkhouse.

"So that's how it is," Buck remarked. "The only thing I'm wondering about is who the man up on the rimrock was, the man who actually shot Jonas in the back."

Jesse didn't give him the information. "Got 'em covered, Mitch?" he called. "I'm coming in."

"All set."

Jesse holstered his gun and came in through the window, then drew his weapon again and moved along the wall.

"I sure didn't expect to see you back," Mitch muttered.

"I started to think, Mitch, after I pulled out. I seen the kid bounce one off Kyle's skull that looked almighty permanent, and I got to figurin' Joe Jack would spill his guts sooner or later, so I come back for the cash."

"I'm glad you did, Jesse. It gives me a chance. Joe Jack was just goin' to start spoutin', and I couldn't stop him."

"Keep 'em covered," Jesse ordered, and holstered his gun again. Then he walked to his bunk and slit a hole in the straw tick along one edge. Johnny saw him pull out a wad of bills, and stuff them into his pocket. Then he moved on to Kyle Sermon's, and did the same.

"So Kyle did the shooting, eh?" Buck muttered.

Jesse Fell looked at him, and grinned. "Anything else you want to know?"

"No," Buck said, "I guess that's all. I'd be interested to know how much cash you got left."

"Most of it," Jesse claimed.

A heavy load slid off Johnny's shoulders. He had Kyle Sermon's death to answer for, and what he had just heard and seen made the answers a lot easier.

"All right, Mitch," Jesse said when he was through. "Now git your pile and we'll blow." His gun came out again as he moved toward the window.

It didn't take Mitch long. Cash in his hand, he started toward the window. "I'm all set, Jesse."

"Thanks for the help, Mitch. I was worried about how I'd handle this bunch. Now, I'll take the cash."

"What?"

"Hand over that cash."

"I'll take care of it." Mitch gave him a puzzled, questioning frown.

"No you won't. You ain't goin' along."

"Say, what is this?"

"You started this play, Mitch. It was all your idea, way back there when we first found out Jonas was comin' home on the stage. So finish it up any which way you got a mind to. I'm pullin' out alone—with that cash. All of it. Hand it over."

"Why, sure, Jesse—sure." He held it out toward Jesse with his left hand. His right hand streaked for his gun. "I'll play it out."

Jesse fired before Mitch freed his gun. Mitch staggered as lead tore into him, but he kept his feet, moving back with short, unsteady steps. "I'll play it out, Jesse, you dirty snake—I'll play it out."

Jesse saved two shots. The rest he used up on Mitch, and all of them took hold in his chest and belly, tearing him to shreds. Mitch got his gun out, but he didn't get off a shot. When the third slug hit him, his hands went up in a swift arc and his gun sailed through the air straight at Johnny. It might have been sheer accident. It might have been intentional. Johnny never did find out which it was. But when he saw it coming at him, Johnny grabbed it and brought it down.

A bullet hit him before he could get it leveled off. "I saved two for you!" Jesse yelled. "After Randy hangs, the law won't—"

JOHNNY fired pointblank. He kept on firing until he ran out of ammunition. Jesse got off his last shot, but it bored a hole in the floor ten feet ahead of him. In the smoky silence that followed, Jesse staggered blindly across the floor. He lunged head on into the wall, bounced back and started in the other direction. He got half way across the room, and then his time ran out. He twisted in a tight circle as if a giant whirlpool had grabbed him by the legs and it was sucking him down. He tried

to fight against it, but it was too much for him. He let out a terror-stricken scream that made Orlie Spane clap his hands to his ears. He tried another one that never got past his throat. One final effort straightened him up, and then he plunged headfirst to the floor. And that was the way death came to the last of the four men who had killed Jonas Hyacinth, and planted the bushwhack killing on Johnny Peblo's kid brother. . . .

Mitch Shone lived long enough, though, to tell about the knotted shoe string they had used to make the killer's mask. He admitted it was his own idea. "I seen him sitting on Carpenter's gallery that day, changing the laces. It looked like a good idea at the time, and we built it up so it looked better an' better. If Johnny hadn't of been too damn' stubborn to know when he was licked, it would've worked. Only Joe Jack couldn't take it either. I never saw the beat. Seems as if there's always somethin' in a crooked deal you can't figure on. . . ."

* * *

It took a full week to get Randy out of jail. Luckily, he hadn't made any effort to bust out by himself after he got hold of Joe Jack's gun, or he would have been in another potful of trouble. When it was finally done, and he breathed free air again, Johnny had everything set to pull out. He had a pair of scrawny nags, and some grub, and a few other possibles they couldn't get along without on a long pasear.

"I figure we'll head north, Randy, and we'll keep goin' till the nags give out. We got to put a lot of miles between us and this here place. A hell of a lot of miles!"

"I'm not goin' anywhere," Randy stated. "I'm goin' to stay right here. We ain't got anything to run away from."

"I had an awful row with the Hyacinth riders, Randy, and sooner or later, they're goin' to git back at us if we stay here. I don't want any more fightin' like that. The only thing to do is to clear out, and let 'em have the run of the place." He said it regretfully, and Randy let the argument drop.

"I want to see Sol Keep, and thank him for what he's done for us," Johnny went on. "I guess that's all I got to do before we go."

Sol had gotten them the extra nag. He was the barkeep at the Big Horn Saloon, and all during the trial had tried to prod old Shimm into making some kind of a show for Randy. He had finally put Shimm on the blacklist, but it hadn't helped any. He let out a whoop when he saw Johnny and Randy walk in together. He shook hands with Randy, and tears streamed down his fat face.

"I knowed it all the time," he insisted, gulping for air. "I wasn't worried a bit. But next time anything like that happens you come right to me, and I'll finance you to the hilt. We won't hire Shimm, I cin tell you that."

"It won't happen again, Sol," Johnny said. "We're pulling out right now. I'll send you cash for the horse when I git on my feet."

"Don't you dare try it, Johnny."

"Anyway, I'll let you know how we make out."

"You do that," Sol said glumly. He shook hands again, and made them take a

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bottle of forty-rod, just in case of rattlesnakes, he explained, because he was bound to give them something and had nothing else at hand.

Johnny and Randy started for the door. Johnny was tall enough to see over the batwings, and what he saw made him grab Randy by the arm, and pull back. "Hyacinth riders!" he muttered. "They just cut our animals loose, and spooked 'em down the street. They're comin' in here, Buck Holzer and the whole bunch."

Sol Keep grabbed his sawed-off shotgun and laid it along the bar. "Out the back, boys!" he yelled. "I'll hold 'em."

They didn't have time to make it. Orlie Spane got past Sol's scatter-gun, and blocked them off. He had a smoky grin on his face as he pushed them back toward the bar, step by step, whipping his empty hand at them. Buck Holzer said something to Sol and quieted him down to a suspicious glare.

"I figured your crew might try something like this," Johnny flared up, "but I didn't think you'd be in on it."

"Why wouldn't I be?" Buck inquired.

"You went after Joe Jack, and tried to break him down for me. I couldn't have done much if you hadn't had half a hunch I was right."

"I just wanted to get out of the place, Johnny," Buck answered. "So you're pulling out, eh?"

Johnny gave him an angry look. "We were, till you spooked our horses."

"Looks like we're just in time, boys," Buck remarked to the crew.

"Let 'em have it, Buck, both barrels," Orlie stated.

"Now just a minute," Johnny broke in. "You can't—"

Buck held up his hand. "I'll do the talkin'."

"Well, what d'you aim to do?" Johnny flared.

"For one thing, we ain't going to let you pull out. You're coming back to the ranch with us—both of you."

"What for?"

"We want to pay you off."

"By Jimminy," Sol broke in, "this is the last time a Hyacinth rider ever gits a drink in this place. I'm puttin' you all on the blacklist."

"Wait a minute, Sol," Buck objected. "We got orders from Jonas' kinfolk. They told us what to do."

"I'll put them on the blacklist, too, when they get here," Sol snapped.

Buck reached in his pocket. "They told me to give you this, Johnny, you and Randy. There's a thousand dollars there for you to split between you."

It took Johnny a long time to get anything out after that, and when he did it was nothing but, "I—I—I—"

"And," Buck went on, "I bragged you up some, and they wrote back I'm to give you both a job on the place if you'll take it."

Johnny gasped and gulped some more. Then he looked at Randy, and Randy's thoughts were a picture in his eyes, but Johnny held back, because he knew there was a trick in it somewhere. "Why'd you spook our horses?" he inquired finally.

"We can't tolerate that kind of crowbait on our place, Johnny."

Johnny scratched his head. "Well, we're a-foot, you know."

"We taken care of that, too."

Buck took Johnny by the arm and walked him to the window. "You see them two spare mounts there at the rack, that paint and the steel gray?"

Johnny nodded.

"The steel gray is yours, and the paint's Randys," Buck went on. "That's why we drove off that crowbait."

Johnny's eyes misted over. "I—I—that's mighty nice of Jonas' kinfolk, them horses especially, but I don't think we can take the job. I stirred up quite a ruckus with the Hyacinth riders, and they wouldn't stand for me being around."

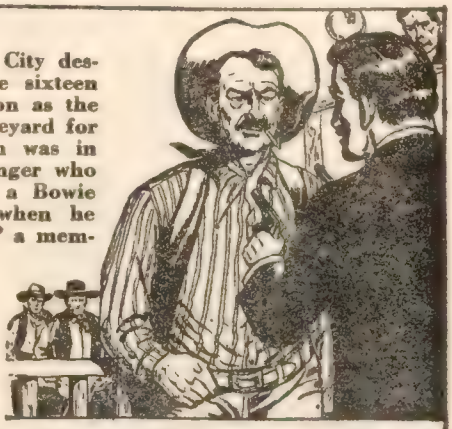
"Hell," Buck said, "those horses are from the boys. They bought 'em out of their own pockets, rig and all—the best money can buy, just to show you there's no hard feelings. You damn well can't turn us down."

Johnny looked them all over—Orlie, with the smoky grin still on his face; Duke Munger; the Whitaker boys; Charlie Kepp, with his bandaged hand, but the sour look gone from his face; Bud Hally, and even Pete Harp. His eyes were misted over still more. "No," he said finally, "I—I can't turn you down. I can't even talk."

THE END

# COLT KINGS OF THE FIGHTING WEST

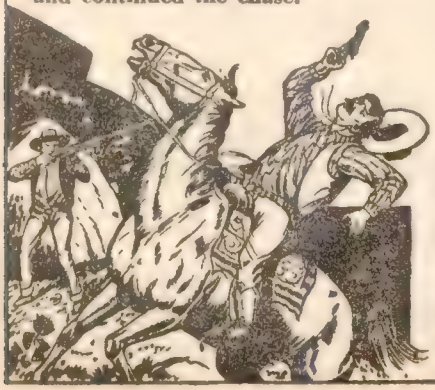
*BY FOWLER AND CASE*



FIGHTING SAM BROWN, notorious Virginia City desperado, was fundamentally a bully, despite the sixteen notches on his six-shooter butt and his reputation as the only badman who ever maintained a private graveyard for his victims. Once, feeling his tough reputation was in jeopardy, Brown chose an inoffensive saloon-lounger who had jostled him and carved out his heart with a Bowie knife! Brown, however, began to lose caste when he appeared in Judge Cradlebaugh's court to "clear" a member of his gang accused of murder. Attorney Bill Stewart drew two derringers on the surprised outlaw. "Give any false testimony," Stewart warned, "and I'll blow your brains out." Brown, deflated, behaved.

"THE KING OF SUN MOUNTAIN," as Brown liked to be called, felt that he must repair this damage to his reputation. That evening he dismounted at the wayside tavern of Henry Van Sickles. Going inside, Brown said to the inn-keeper, "How you feeling, Van?" When Van Sickles answered, "Tip-top," Brown said, "Guess you're feeling too damned good," and started shooting. Unarmed, Van Sickles fled from the house. He remained hidden till Brown left, then, realizing the consequences if he left the issue undecided, he decided to go after Brown. He took his shotgun, already loaded with fine shot, and added a charge of buckshot to each barrel. Then he spurred down the road. It was Brown's thirtieth birthday. Van Sickles hoped to make it his last.

VAN SICKLES overhauled Brown a mile up the road. Sam hitched around in his saddle and fired, wild. Van Sickles spurred closer, discharged both shotgun barrels and literally blew Brown off his horse. Miraculously still alive, Brown fired from the hip, and missed again. Then he remounted and rode frantically toward Gold Canyon. If he could reach Sun Mountain he'd be safe, and could pick off the inn-keeper at leisure. Van Sickles reloaded his gun and continued the chase.



VAN SICKLES KNEW A SHORT-CUT which recrossed the main trail four miles ahead. There he hid in a clump of brush. It was pitch-black. Suddenly came a jingle of saddle gear. It was now or never. Van Sickles stepped into the road. "Right here, Sam," Van Sickles called, and as Brown jerked around, he let go with both barrels. Brown toppled from his horse. The verdict of the coroner's jury was short, and to Van Sickles, very sweet. It was: "Samuel Brown has come to his death from a just dispensation of an all-wise Providence. It served him right!"

# REMEMBER BLOODY THURSDAY!

**Saga of Border Fighters**

**By Philip Ketchum**

Bill drove a shot at Jennings

## CHAPTER ONE

### "Go Back with a Gun in your Hand!"

**Men said that the Four Mile Castlens had almost made it safely through the smoke that day, that but for the courage of Sheriff Dan Hogarth, blasting his gun through the window, they would have made it. Yet the Four Mile Castlens had sworn Hogarth was the one friend they'd had on that range. . . . The kind of friend whose loyalty could best be rewarded with a bullet in the back!**

HE WOULD never forget that day, never as long as he lived. He would never forget the judge standing at the table, facing his father and his brother Ed, and saying in his terribly deep voice, "The jury finds you guilty an' in this country there's only one penalty for cattle rustlin'. Take 'em out, boys, an' string 'em up!"

He would never forget the sudden interruption, the sight of his other brother Jerry, at the window, a gun in each hand. Jerry's face had been grim and his voice had a snap in it. He would never forget the way his father and Ed had grabbed weapons from the men close to them and had started for the window. He would never forget the shooting.

Men said that the Four Mile Castlens

almost made it that day, that they came close to getting away. Men said that except for the quick thinking of Sheriff Dan Hogarth they would have made it. It was Hogarth who had ducked outside and blocked their way through the window. Hogarth, who had posed as a friend of the Four Mile Castlens. Bill would never forget that either or Sam Newhouser, who had been responsible for the arrest and whose men had shot his father and his two brothers to death.

This had been more than ten years ago. This had been when the law was new to Tubec and when most cattlemen swung a wide rope and a sixgun was more important than what was written in the judge's book. This had happened when Bill was just eleven but the memory had never left him. This had ended the Castlen ranch on Four Mile Creek and had sent Bill off on the wandering, drifting trail he still followed. He had been offered a home. He had been offered a home even by Dan Hogarth but he wouldn't let Hogarth near him. He had screamed his boyish defiance at the man and had gloried in hearing someone refer to him as "Just another Four Mile Castlen." He had run away, promising himself that some day he would come back. And now he was going back.

He had changed. He had been a boy of eleven, thin, sickly, awkward. He was now almost twenty-two and was better than six feet tall. He was still thin but there was nothing wrong with his health and he had lost his awkwardness. His body was well muscled. He had the gray eyes of his mother and he didn't know it but he looked a good deal like Jerry who had dared to hold up a courtroom full of men. He was like Jerry in other ways. He had some of Jerry's stubbornness and touches of his reckless anger.

A good many things can happen to an eleven-year-old boy cut loose in the world. A good many things had happened to Bill Castlen. He had gone hungry. He had learned to steal in order to eat. He had learned to fight. He might have ended up, earlier than this, in an outlaw's grave, and he had come close to following that path. Luck and a gruff old cattleman in Idaho named Dan Weller had turned him the other way. But even Dan Weller hadn't been able to stop him from making this trip back to Tubec.

"Some day, Dan, I've got to face it," Bill had said. "Some day I've got to go back there and stir up the past and I might as well get it over with."

"What do you mean by stir up the past?" Dan Weller had asked.

"I don't know," Bill admitted.

"Will it help any to kill Hogarth and Newhouser?"

"I don't know. I don't know what I'll have to do but I've got to go back or I'll never be able to live with myself."

"Revenge never pays off in satisfaction, Bill," Dan Weller had said slowly. "It's a bitter medicine for everyone involved. Go back, if you have to, but don't go back with a gun in your hand."

WEST of Tubec lies the desert and north, east and south are green, rolling hills. They rise high to the east and grow rugged and men call them the San Jacinto Mountains. Bill Castlen came that way, through the mountains past the little town of Hado. He spent a night there and the next day dropped down through the hills and angled toward Tubec. In the late afternoon he came to what he thought was Four Mile Creek. Somewhere along here had been the Castlen ranch but he wasn't sure just where he could find it or who might be running it now. He turned down the creek and came to a place where it widened into a bog. It had been fenced but at one point the fence had broken down and several cattle had drifted through the break and were mired in the bog. A rider on a sorrel horse was roping them and pulling them free, and as Bill, skirting the fence, drew nearer, he saw that the rider was a girl. She was slender, dark-haired, and she went about the job in a workman-like manner. She was just pulling the last steer free when Bill reined up.

"You could have come by earlier," she called. "If you had mended this fence—" She broke off and stared at Bill more closely and then shook her head. "I'm sorry. I thought you were someone else."

"You did all right," Bill told her.

The girl herded the last of the cattle beyond the line of the fence, then turned her horse toward Bill. She was about twenty, Bill decided, and was probably almost as tall as he was. She was wearing levis and a man's shirt and coat. The coat was too

big for her. There was a frown on her face and a thoughtful, steady look in her eyes. She glanced at the brand his horse was wearing.

"Just riding through?" she asked, still frowning.

"As far as Tubec," Bill answered.

The girl's lips tightened. "How much did Wade offer you?"

Bill didn't know whom the girl meant. He shook his head. "I don't get it," he said slowly. "Who is Wade?"

"He's running things for Sam Newhouser. So you never heard of him. Do you want a job?"

"Where?"

"On the Wagonwheel."

"Your ranch?"

"My father's."

Bill shook his head. He grinned at the girl. "Maybe this fellow Wade will pay more."

The stern, unsmiling look was still on the girl's face. "Yes, he'll pay more," she said flatly. "You'll probably find him in Tubec."

She turned her horse as she said that and started away. She sat very straight in the saddle.

"If I change my mind," Bill called, "where's the Wagonwheel?"

The girl pulled up and looked back. "Down the creek a ways," she answered.

"And whom do I ask for?" Bill wanted to know.

"Dan Hogarth."

Bill caught his breath. The ranch on this creek had been the Castlen ranch, ten years ago. It had belonged to his father, lock, stock and barrel.

The girl waved her hand and rode on. Bill watched her until she was out of sight. "Dan Hogarth's daughter," he muttered. He wasn't smiling, now. A tight scowl had worked into his face, a scowl which deepened the lines around his mouth and narrowed his eyes. He was suddenly glad he had returned. Dan Hogarth, who had betrayed the Castlens, was living on and running the Castlen ranch. And Newhouser, whose men had shot the Castlens down, had a man working for him named Wade, who was hiring riders at a premium. It looked as though he might have an interesting time.

West of the creek was a road which led toward Tubec. Bill followed it and before dusk reached the outskirts of the town. Tubec was much smaller than he remembered but as the road became a narrow street which led in toward the square Bill suddenly recalled the little girl who had lived on this street and who had always waved to him when he rode into town with his father or his brothers.

There was no one to wave to him today. Bill followed the street to the stable and corral at the edge of the square. He left his horse in the care of the man there and took a brief look at the park square and the business houses fronting on it. This picture was vaguely familiar to him. Down the street to the left was the Macon Moore saloon. There was a dry, bitter taste in Bill's mouth. He felt the need of a drink. He headed for the saloon.

It wasn't a large place. There was a bar at one side of the room and a few tables and chairs on the other. Two men stood at the bar talking to the man behind it. At one of the tables a man was playing solitaire, and at another three were playing stud poker. Bill moved up to the bar and hooked his elbows on it. He pushed back his hat and when the bartender came up he tried to grin, tried to act friendly. "Something to wash out the dust of a long trip," he suggested. "Make it the best you've got."

The bartender set a bottle and glass in front of him and Bill poured a drink. He was suddenly aware of the fact that the two other men at the bar had turned their heads and were studying him. He looked that way. Both men were older than he. The one nearest him had a black beard and a tight, ugly scowl. His gun holster was tied low against his leg and there was a warning in this. A holster tied low was always the sure mark of a gun-hawk.

BILL had his drink. He poured another and stared at it thoughtfully. On a range where men were being hired at a premium there was usually trouble in the making. He wondered what the trouble was here. After a moment he dug the money to pay for his drinks from his pocket and laid it on the bar.

The black-bearded man broke away from his companion and came over toward Bill Castlen. He was still scowling. "Just get in?" he asked bluntly.

Bill looked around at the man and nodded.

"Lookin' for Jim Wade?" asked the man.

Bill shook his head. He said, "No." The word was sharp, final.

"Then it's Hogarth," said the bearded man. "I sort of guessed it when I saw you. Head for the door. Get out of here, get on your horse an' start ridin'."

Bill sucked in a long, slow breath. He fought against the sudden, hot anger which swept over him. The bearded man, he noticed, had stiffened and his hand had dropped until his fingertips brushed the butt of his gun. There was a rock-hard look in his eyes. Back of him, his companion was watching this closely. The stud poker game, Bill realized, had stopped. Only the man who was playing solitaire seemed uninterested in what was going on.

"Didn't you hear me?" said the bearded man. "Get started."

Bill shook his head. "I've still got a drink to finish. "I used to—"

He got as far as that but no further. The bearded man roared a warning and clawed up his gun. Bill lunged at him. One of Bill's hands slashed down at the gun and knocked it aside. The other, balled into a fist, caught the bearded man squarely in the face. It was a solid blow and it drove the bearded man backwards. He lost his balance and fell heavily to the floor.

Bill's hand slapped down to his gun. The other man was crouching over. His hand swung up and the gun he had drawn exploded. Bill felt the tug of a bullet at the sleeve of his coat. He fired and saw the man's body jerk and saw the shocked look which came into his eyes. The man's gun slid from his hand. He turned half around. His knees caved in and he went down.

The room seemed terribly still. The three stud players had left their table and scrambled to the side wall. The man who had been playing solitaire had joined them. The bartender's hands were out of sight, under the bar, probably gripping a shotgun which he didn't know whether or not to try to use. Bill lowered his gun. He watched the bearded man get to his feet. A trickle of blood showed at the corner of his mouth. He had dropped his gun when he had fallen and he stared at it now, and then looked up, his eyes still hard. He took a step toward the gun.

"Let me pick it up," he said suddenly. "Give me that much of a break, at least."

Bill shook his head. "Leave the gun where it is."

"There'll be another day."

"Probably a good many of them."

"But not for you."

Voices reached into the room from outside. The door was pushed open abruptly and several men came in, following a short, heavy-set fellow who wore a sheriff's star on his vest. They ranged themselves between Bill Castlen and the door, and the sheriff, after a sharp glance at Bill, moved forward and knelt at the side of the man on the floor. His examination was very brief. He was shaking his head as he stood up.

"What happened, Jennings?" he asked the bearded man.

Wes Jennings stooped over and picked up his gun. His lips were twisted bitterly. "We had a little trouble," he said slowly. "Slim went for his gun. He got the first shot, but he missed. I'll even things up for him later on."

The sheriff looked troubled. He stared at Bill. "What's your name?"

"Castlen," Bill answered clearly.

"Castlen?" said the sheriff. "Castlen? There used to be some Castlens out on Four Mile Creek."

Bill nodded his head. "That's where I used to live."

The sheriff blinked. "You—you're the kid. The one who ran away."

Again Bill nodded.

A man near the door moved forward to get a better look at him.

"Anything else, Sheriff," Bill asked bluntly, "or can I go now?"

The scowl came back to the sheriff's face. He said, "Castlen, I don't know why you came back. What happened ten or more years ago is over and done. I'll stand for no trouble around here. Get that straight."

Bill Castlen shrugged his shoulders. He turned and headed for the door. No one tried to stop him.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Gunman for Himself

DUSK had settled down over the town while he had been in the Macon Moore Saloon and a cool, north wind had come up.

Bill Castlen angled across the square. He stopped under one of its trees for a while and looked back toward the saloon. His nerves were raw, jumpy. He regretted what had happened. He didn't care how much trouble he ran into if it was related to what had happened to his folks ten years ago, but a saloon brawl was nothing to be proud of.

Bill fashioned a cigarette and lit it. His hands were steady. He reloaded his gun and set it lightly in its holster. He glanced around the square. There were a dozen or fifteen saddled horses at the tie-rails, there were several wagons. A few people were moving along the boardwalks. Bill inhaled deeply on his cigarette. He marked the location of a restaurant and, after a momentary hesitation, headed that way. He had suddenly become hungry.

The restaurant went by the name of Crosley's. There was a vacant table against the wall. Bill sat down there and ordered his evening meal from a woman with stringy, gray hair, a woman who looked thin and tired and vaguely familiar. Bill wondered if he had eaten here long ago with his folks. He had a feeling that he had, but he wasn't sure. The place was fairly well crowded. The food was good.

Bill was almost through eating when a man came in and sat down across from him. The man looked close to sixty. He was short, stooped, bald and very thin. The skin of his face was deeply wrinkled. He was one of the men who had followed the sheriff into the Macon Moore just after the shooting.

"You probably don't remember me, Bill," the man said slowly. "I'm Clem Morgan. I worked for your old man before you had learned to walk. Your mother was still living in those days and there wasn't a finer place in the country for a man to work than on Castlen's Four Mile ranch."

Bill pushed back his plate. "Were you here ten years ago when my folks were killed?"

"No. I was over in the San Esteban country."

"But you know the story?"

"I know what I've heard, what everyone around here has heard."

"And what's that?"

"Sam Newhouser accused the Castlens of rustling and proved it in court. The Cas-

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tlens tried to shoot their way free. They still call that day 'Bloody Thursday'."

Bill Castlen ran his hands through his hair. "What are the details?" he asked slowly. "Whose cattle had we been rustling?"

"Cattle which Newhouser said were his, I reckon. I don't know, actually. I just know what I heard."

"Does Sam Newhouser still live here?"

"He's got the biggest ranch in these parts. He's got a big crew. Wes Jennings works for him; so did Slim Hobart, the man you shot. Newhouser's getting old. He's not as active as he used to be. He's got a man named Jim Wade who runs things for him. Jim Wade has been having trouble with Dan Hogarth, who runs what used to be the Castlen ranch."

Bill caught his breath. He leaned forward. "What's that again? Who runs the Castlen place? I want to be sure."

"Dan Hogarth. He quit being sheriff several years ago and moved out there, but before that he had a man running the place for him."

This was the kind of information Bill wanted. He stared at Clem Morgan without seeing him. He thought again of Hogarth on the Castlen ranch. Dan Hogarth, who had pretended to be a friend of the Castlens, but who had arrested them and who had blocked their escape through the courthouse window. He thought of Sam Newhouser, who had pressed the charge of cattle stealing against the Castlens and who was still here. He didn't feel so badly, now, about what had happened in the Macon Moore Saloon. Jennings worked for Newhouser and so had the man he had shot.

"I'm deputy sheriff in this county," Morgan was saying. "I'm telling you this because you would learn it, anyhow, and we want to know what you're going to do. There's enough trouble shaping up. We don't want to add any more."

Bill leaned back. He stared at the man across the table.

"I'll make it stronger," Morgan said stubbornly. "Maybe we can't head off the fight between Hogarth and Newhouser but we can tone it down a lot and we will. And we can keep an outsider from coming in here and starting a war of his own. I'm talking about you now, Bill. Step out of line just once and you'll discover how strong our jail is. Damn it all, stay clear!"

Morgan hadn't raised his voice. His face showed no anger. He looked like a mild-tempered, easy going old man but it was hard to dodge what he had said.

He got to his feet now and looked down at Bill. He said, "Stay around here as long as you like. Dig into the old records at the courthouse if you want to. Talk to some of the men who remember your folks. If someone pushes you around, push back. But don't start anything. Henry Usher is a tougher sheriff than he looks, and I'm backing him up, all the way."

Bill Castlen watched the old man head for the door. He felt a reluctant admiration for him. He had a notion that Clem Morgan had meant everything he had said and he knew that this made the task which faced him more difficult. He left the money to pay for his meal on the table and got up and moved outside.

IT WAS now fully dark. There were stars in the sky above the square and only a few of the buildings around it showed any lights. The sound of a fiddle came from one of the saloons and in front of another a dozen men were gathered in a group, probably listening to some argument. Bill walked up the street to the hotel. He signed the register, got his room key and turned back outside. The man at the stable grumbled about getting his bag, but got it for him, and Bill carried it back to his room where he washed up and put on a shirt he had saved for his arrival in Tubec. He had just finished this when there was a knock on the door. He turned toward it frowning.

"Who's there?" he called bluntly.

"Wade," came the answer. "Jim Wade. I want to talk to you."

The frown on Bill's face deepened. He touched the gun he was wearing, loosening it in its holster. "Come on in," he suggested.

The man who opened the door was tall, broadshouldered and in his mid-thirties. His skin was deeply tanned. He had sharp features. He was smiling but the smile on his lips didn't quite reach his eyes which were dark, sharp, watchful. Bill was aware of the insistent tug of some old memory. He had a feeling that he had seen this man before, and not under the name of Jim Wade. Just where it had been or what name Wade

had been using then, he didn't know. For an instant it seemed that he almost had the identification, then it slipped away.

"So you're Bill Castlen," Wade was saying. "You know, almost the first family I heard about when I came here was the Four Mile Castlens. Mind if I come in?"

Wade's voice was friendly. If the man remembered him from some other contact his manner didn't show it. He entered the room, closed the door, crossed over to the bed and sat down.

Bill eyed the man narrowly. "You didn't come here to talk about my family."

"Maybe not," Wade shrugged.

"What do you want?"

"I don't know yet," Wade said slowly. "Why did you come back?"

Bill shook his head. "I don't know yet."

Wade's smile wasn't so friendly, now. His lips had tightened a little. "I know the story of what happened on Bloody Thursday," he said bluntly. "I know that the man who charged the Castlens with rustling was Sam Newhouser. I know that the sheriff who arrested them was Dan Hogarth, who took over and runs the old Castlen ranch on Four Mile Creek. If I were in your boots I'd know why I had come back."

"What would you do?" Bill asked.

"Probably get myself killed. Hogarth isn't alone out there on Four Mile Creek. He's got a couple of pretty tough men you would have to get past. Sam Newhouser isn't exactly helpless, either."

Bill managed a grin. "Where does that get us, Wade? Does it bring us to why you came here?"

Jim Wade nodded. "I thought you might like to work for me."

"Think again," Bill said promptly.

"You think again!" Wade snapped. "Think damn hard. I might be able to show you a way to even things with Hogarth. I might even be able to show you how to get to Newhouser. Try it on your own and you won't have a chance."

Here was an angle which hadn't occurred to Bill Castlen. Jim Wade might be on Newhouser's payroll but the man was evidently working for himself. Bill wished, desperately, that he knew more about the local situation, more about the trouble between Hogarth and Newhouser.

Wade got to his feet and crossed to the door. He opened it and then looked back. "We'll be leaving town in about an hour," he said slowly. "You can ride with us or you can ride alone. You won't get very far alone."

BILL CASTLEN paced back and forth across the room, considering Jim Wade's offer. He couldn't understand it. It didn't make sense. Even considering the trouble Wade was having with Hogarth, it didn't make sense. Bill worked a scowl into his face. Who was this man who called himself Jim Wade? Where had he seen him before? What was his game? It was more than fighting Hogarth, for he had indicated a disloyalty to Newhouser.

He could find no answers to any of these questions in his mind and after a time he put out his lamp and left the room. There was no one in the hotel's narrow lobby. Bill moved on outside, hesitated for an instant in front of the door and then turned up the street. He had only taken two or three steps when he heard the shot. It was a little high. The bullet clipped the high crown of his hat. He sensed this as he dove for the shadows at the corner of the hotel.

"He's heading around back, Dan!" called a voice from somewhere down the street. "Cut him off!"

*Dan! Dan Hogarth!*

Bill pounded toward the back of the hotel and crouched there in the darkness close to the building, his eyes probing the vague shadows beyond. He caught the hint of a movement far to the left and he threw a shot that way. A bullet screamed through the air above his head. Bill fired again at the flash of the gun. He circled away from the hotel and, crouching close to the ground, he called, "Hogarth! Dan Hogarth! This way!"

Dan Hogarth, apparently, wasn't alone in this. Bullets stabbed toward him from two separate points. Bill blasted away at the man who seemed nearest, but shooting in the dark was guesswork. He heard no sounds to indicate that the man had been hit. He crouched close to the ground and reloaded his gun and waited there, every nerve in his body sharply attuned to danger. His eyes probed the shadows but could distinguish nothing. After a time he moved and then he called Hogarth's name again but there were no shots this time. The men

who had followed him back here seemed to have withdrawn.

Bill circled through the darkness and came back toward the square and at the corner of a darkened building near the stable and corral he viewed the street. A crowd of men had just left the Macon Moore Saloon. He heard someone call Wade's name and heard Jim Wade's answer and he realized that an hour must have passed since Wade had talked to him in his room. Wade's crowd was ready to head for the ranch.

He stared soberly at the dark figures of the men who were gathering at the corral for their horses. He wondered what kind of men these were. He wondered how many Wade could count on for whatever it was he planned. And how far out of it was Sam Newhouser? He had come back here knowing that he might have to face two men. One of them had definitely tried to kill him; the other, probably without being aware of it, could provide him at least with a temporary haven. One of them he might be able to use to destroy the other. He could ride with Jim Wade, he decided, and still be his own man.

Bill settled his gun gently into its holster and stepped out on the street. He angled for the corral.

## CHAPTER THREE

### A Ride to Hogarth Land

SAM NEWHOUSER was short, thin, stoop-shouldered. He had dry, wrinkled skin. His eyes were still clear and sharp but he seemed to Bill Castlen to be a very old man. He sat in a chair with a high back. He had been working on a set of books this morning when Bill and Jim Wade came in and his eyes narrowed a little when Wade said, "This is Bill Castlen. His folks used to live on Four Mile Creek. Maybe you remember them."

Bill didn't speak. He stared at this man whose charge against the Castlens, long ago, had resulted in their arrest and the fight in the courthouse. He didn't remember Newhouser but he had expected to find a stronger and more dominant man wearing that name.

"Castlen!" said the old man. "Castlen! What's he doing here?"

"He's working for you," Wade answered.

"Working for me?" Newhouser roared. "Never! Get rid of him. Every Castlen I ever knew was a horse thief."

"That's a lie," Bill said sharply.

Newhouser shook his head. "Get rid of him, Wade. If he's a Castlen he's no good."

Newhouser wasn't wearing a gun. He didn't get out of his chair as he spoke but the quick temper of the man seemed very real.

"We need him," Wade was saying. "Hogarth has hired several new men. He's going to move in on us, Sam."

"Not while I'm living," Sam Newhouser growled.

Bill Castlen moved forward. "Newhouser," he said bluntly, "I was a kid ten years ago when you had my folks arrested and when your men shot them down. You charged them with cattle stealing. I want the facts."

"The records are at the courthouse," Newhouser snapped.

"I want it from you. What was the charge?"

"Cattle stealing."

"Whose cattle?"

"Mine."

"What was your proof?"

Sam Newhouser leaned forward. "I had it, youngster. I had it or it would never have stood up in court. Your old man and his sons made off with five hundred beef we had rounded up for a drive to Encino. Hell, they did it openly. We didn't need much proof. Look up the records."

Bill moistened his lips. He couldn't believe this. He shook his head. "I'll look up the records, Newhouser," he said grimly. "I'll do more than that. I'll test them. If I find what I think I'll find I'll haul you into that courthouse and we'll see what brand of justice they're putting out today."

Newhouser looked over at Jim Wade. "Get him out of here," he roared. "Get him out of here or loan me that gun you're wearing. I never could stand a Castlen."

"Take it easy, Sam," Wade advised. "Forget he's a Castlen. We've got Dan Hogarth to worry about."

"I never could stand him, either," Newhouser growled.

Bill Castlen turned away. He had come back too late, so far as Newhouser was concerned. This wasn't the same Sam New-

houser who had brought about the arrest of the Castlens and with whom the Castlens had long had trouble. This was just a querulous old man whose roaring defiance was almost child-like.

Wade joined him on the porch and stood there, rolling a cigarette. There was an amused look in Wade's eyes and after a moment Wade said, "Well, what about it, Castlen?"

Bill Castlen shrugged his shoulders but made no other answer.

"He's not a bad sort," Wade said slowly. "Now and then he blows up, gets out of hand for a while, but he doesn't bother us much."

Bill still didn't make any answer. He could understand, now, Wade's assurance in his control of this ranch, but that was about all he could understand. He had come out here the night before with Wade's men and had seen them this morning. They hadn't been friendly or talkative. They didn't seem much like a working crew. They weren't a working crew. A good many of them had slept late. Most of them, even now, were still hanging around the ranch with apparently nothing to do. There had been mention of a poker game. It had probably been started in the bunkhouse. There wasn't time around a ranch this big to play poker in the daytime. There were too many jobs to be done.

"Any questions, Castlen?" Wade asked suddenly.

Bill nodded. "A few. What do your men do, Wade, besides hang around here and ride into town and back?"

"Nothing. But they'll fight, Castlen, when the time comes."

"Fight whom?"

"Hogarth. Maybe you don't remember it, but the cause of the trouble between your folks and Sam Newhouser was water, the water in Four Mile Creek. That's as important an issue today as it was ten years ago. That's why Hogarth is moving in on us. He wants to hog all the water. We intend to take our share. You see some men hanging around here. They're extras for the trouble which is just ahead. We've still got our regular crew."

Bill was frowning. This sounded as though it might be true but if there was any regular crew around here, they had been out all night. Bill hadn't seen them start off this morning. It was damned strange.

"Go take a ride around the country," Wade suggested. "Look over the water situation and you'll see why Four Mile Creek water is important. Take a couple days to get familiar with the land you might have to do a lot of riding over later."

This was a rather appealing suggestion. Bill didn't want to stay around here with Wade's crew. He didn't like the way the black-bearded Jennings kept watching him. He didn't like the hard, narrow, suspicious looks in the eyes of the other men. He said, "Good idea, Wade," and headed for the corral.

Wes Jennings watched him saddle up. Jennings hadn't said a word to him last night or this morning and the man didn't speak now as Bill cinched on his saddle or when Bill turned to face him.

"Something bothering you, Jennings?" Bill asked bluntly.

The bearded man moistened his lips. His hand inched toward the gun he was wearing, then fell away.

"Well?" Bill insisted.

"I'm thinking of Slim," Jennings said slowly. "A good many of us are thinking of Slim this morning."

"Do you think you are quicker with a gun than he was?" Bill snapped.

"Yes."

Bill Castlen looked the man squarely in the eye. "Do you want to find out?"

The temptation was there. Bill could read it in Jennings' eyes. Jennings' body stiffened and his hand moved again toward his gun and poised just above it. He bent forward a little.

"Hey, Jennings," Wade called from the porch of the house. "Come here. I want to talk to you a minute."

This was a sharp, insistent command. The bearded man sucked in his breath. The tension left his body. He said, "Next time, Castlen," and turned abruptly away and headed for the porch.

Bill swung into the saddle. He wheeled his horse and started away. He didn't look back toward the ranchhouse buildings but for a while the muscles of his back were tensed against the possible shock of a bullet.

HE DIDN'T remember this country but last night, to get to Newhouser's ranch, they had taken a road which ran north and

east. This meant that Four Mile Creek was to the east and he turned that way. These were rolling hills which he was traveling and the grass was none too good. Cactus and Joshua trees were plentiful. The cattle he passed didn't look too well fed.

After a time he came to the upper course of Four Mile Creek. This, he knew, was far above the old Castlen ranch and he followed the stream south. It wasn't a wide stream. Cattle fringed its bank and he came to one place where a dam had been built and later destroyed. A dam, here, would hold back all the water which Hogarth probably needed.

Bill rode on. He wasn't sure where the dividing line was between Newhouser's ranch and the land now claimed by Hogarth, but when he came to the bog he was pretty sure he was on his father's old property. He had met Hogarth's daughter here the afternoon before and she was here again, this time repairing the broken fence. She had already set two posts. Bill reined up and watched her tighten the wires. The girl was wholly intent on what she was doing. She hadn't noticed him and Bill waited until he thought she had finished, then rode closer.

"Good job," he called. "When I need a wire fence fixed, I'll send for you."

The girl jerked around, startled. She relaxed a little as she recognized him.

"You here again?" she answered. "Couldn't you find Tubec?"

Bill scowled. He wished this girl wasn't Dan Hogarth's daughter. "I found it," he said bluntly.

The girl moved nearer. The tight frown he had seen before was again on her face. "You're not Bill Castlen, are you?" she demanded.

"That's the name," Bill nodded.

The girl bit her lips. "Then we live on the ranch where you used to live. My father wants to see you."

"Your father and who else?" Bill asked flatly.

"Why, I don't know. Father—"

"He tried to see me last night in town. He and one other man at least. They were both bum shots."

The girl stiffened. "I don't know what you're talking about. Father wasn't in Tubec last night. He didn't hear that you were back until this morning."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, that's so."

There was a stormy look in the girl's eyes. Her lips were pressed tightly together. Her shoulders were thrown back. She was standing very straight.

"Suppose you carry a message to your father for me," Bill suggested.

"You can carry your own messages," the girl snapped.

"And I will, one of these days," Bill nodded. "But for right now suppose you tell him that I took the job his daughter suggested, a job with Jim Wade."

The girl nodded her head. "I'm not surprised," she said hotly. "I'm not surprised at all. That's what you'd expect of a Castlen."

There was a biting contempt in the girl's voice. She was still rigid, defiant. Bill could feel the flush of color rising in his face. He leaned forward. "What do you mean by that?" he shouted. "What's wrong with being a Castlen?"

"Nothing—if you have no respect for the law."

Bill fought down the surging anger which almost choked him. This was a girl. You could use nothing but words against a girl. Polite words. He shook his head. "You've got it all wrong," he said slowly. "The Castlens placed their trust in a sheriff named Hogarth, who double-crossed them. They didn't buck the law until then—and then they lost."

The girl caught her breath. "You're lying. You know you're lying."

"I'm telling the truth."

"Will you face my father and tell him that?"

"Yes. That's one of the reasons I came back."

"Come on, then. We'll find him."

Bill shook his head, remembering the shots the night before. "You find him and bring him here," he suggested. "I'm all alone."

"Are you afraid, Mr. Castlen?"

There was a mocking note in the girl's voice and just a tinge of the contempt he had heard a moment before.

"Are you afraid, Mr. Castlen?" she asked again. "Would you like to have Jim Wade and some of his hired thugs with you?"

"I'll wait here," Bill said stubbornly.

"Don't bother," answered the girl. "I'm

sure my father was mistaken in what he thought of the Castlens. Go back to Jim Wade. Help him build another dam. Help him run off some more of our cattle. Stay with the crowd you seem to like."

She was furious. She was so mad that her words seemed to stumble over one another as they fell from her lips. Her hands were clenched at her sides and a flush showed in her face. She was breathing pretty fast.

"I didn't join Wade to rustle cattle," Bill snapped.

"That's what you'll do while you're with him?"

Bill shook his head. He started to make some answer but the girl had turned and was running for her horse. She threw herself into the saddle and rode down creek at a furious gallop. Bill called after her but she didn't look back.

THE poker game in the bunkhouse was still in progress when Bill Castlen returned to the Newhouser ranch early in the evening. Six men were sitting in it and the stakes were high. The air was foul with smoke. Empty bottles, and cigar and cigarette butts littered the floor. Bill had cared for his horse, had prowled the mess kitchen for food and now, from the edge of one of the bunks, watched the game. Jennings wasn't here and Bill didn't know the names of all the others but three of the men at the table he remembered. One was tall, thin, and had a scar over his left eye and went by the name of Frank Soderman. The redhead was Ed Brock. The big man with the barrel chest and shoulders as heavy as an ox was called Ringo Peters.

These men and the others, Bill realized, might have been cowhands, once. They could ride and dress and talk the lingo of a cowhand. They could probably rope a steer if they had to, but they weren't cowhands. Cowhands didn't have the kind of money they were using in this game, didn't put away as much liquor as these men had apparently consumed, didn't keep their guns always as handy as these men did.

After a time Bill sprawled out on the bunk and closed his eyes and tried to understand as much of the picture as he knew. Hogarth's daughter had mentioned cattle rustling and the dam. He had seen where the dam had been. The dam and the rustling of Hogarth's cattle, would without any question, be enough to cause trouble between Newhouser and Hogarth. But why had these men bothered with Hogarth's cattle when there were cattle right here on Newhouser's range which they could have driven to market with no trouble at all. He had done a good deal of riding today. He could have tallied several thousand cattle bearing Newhouser's brand. Newhouser, apparently, had turned the running of the ranch over to Wade. And if this was so, why had Wade sent his men after Hogarth. It didn't make sense. Wade could have cleaned up this range of his own and made a sizeable chunk of money and run no risk.

The smoke in the room was thick enough to give a man a headache. Bill got to his feet and stepped outside. He crossed to the corral fence and was leaning there against it when three men rode up. He recognized Jennings' voice and the voice of Jim Wade. Who the third man was he didn't know. They dismounted close to where he was standing.

"Tomorrow afternoon, then?" Jennings asked.

"Yeah," Wade replied. "You and Riley take him up. Rex Tenney will handle the other end of the deal. That should set things perfectly for the next morning."

"And if it doesn't work out that way?"

"Things I plan always work out," Wade snapped. "Tell Castlen I want to see him tomorrow noon. See that he sticks around."

"I'll see that he sticks around," Jennings said grimly.

Bill Castlen stood rigidly against the corral fence. He was hoping, almost praying to hear more, but Wade turned toward the ranchhouse and Jennings angled for the bunkhouse door. The third man, grumbling, started to unsaddle the horses.

A minute passed and then another. The man unsaddling the horses was so close that Bill didn't dare move. Jennings, who had entered the bunkhouse, came back outside and stood near the door, his body dimly visible in the fringe of the door's light.

"Hey, Riley," he called. "Have you seen anyone out there?"

The man unsaddling the horses looked around. "Naw, who would I see?" he called back.

"Castlen."

"Is he gone?"

"He was here a minute ago."

"Maybe he's run out on us."

"See if his saddle is here, Riley."

The saddle rack was in the stable. Riley grumbled, but started that way, and as he moved off Bill edged along the corral fence for a little distance, then cut over toward the bunkhouse door. He started whistling. He didn't appear to see Jennings until he almost bumped into him, and he drew back, then, and stopped whistling. A scowl came quickly to his face.

"Castlen's saddle is here," Riley called from the stable.

Bill Castlen's scowl grew deeper. "Checking up on me, huh?" he said to Jennings. "I don't like men who get too nosey."

"Where you been?" Jennings grated.

Bill shook his head. This was a game you couldn't play with half-way measures. "It's none of your damned business," he answered promptly. "Get the hell out of my way."

He thought it was going to come, then. Jennings sucked in his breath and his hand lowered toward his gun, hesitated there, then lifted again and the bearded man shook his head.

"Not yet, Castlen," he said grimly. "I'll be the one to pick the time and the place."

"Don't wait too long," Bill prodded.

Jennings shrugged his shoulders and turned toward the door. Bill Castlen followed him inside.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Story from the Past

SOMETHING was in the wind. Something big. Something important. Early in the morning two men headed north and it didn't escape Bill's notice that a blanket roll and a dufflebag were tied back of each man's saddle. An uneasy restlessness seemed to have gripped the others. They couldn't keep still. One man, a fellow named Rawlings, kept checking the action of his gun as though he wasn't sure of it. Several more had cleaned and oiled their guns soon after dawn.

These signs were too apparent to be missed. Bill Castlen lounged in the shade of the stable and tried to figure out what lay ahead. He could reach no satisfactory conclusions. He puzzled over a name. Rex Tenney. Wade had said that Rex Tenney would handle the other end of the deal. But what deal, and who was Tenney?

Over at the corral Wes Jennings and Riley were saddling up. Bill had another cigarette. It was close to noon. Wade wanted to see him at noon. He had a feeling that Wade had scheduled some part for him in whatever lay ahead and he was aware of a vague, gnawing apprehension.

Jim Wade appeared suddenly on the porch of the house and called him and Bill Castlen got to his feet. He dropped his cigarette, stepped on it, and then walked to the house. Wade had a scowl on his face and the same restlessness which had been working on the others seemed to have laid its grip on him.

"I want you to saddle up, Castlen," Wade said bluntly. "I want you to go along with Jennings and Riley. There's a job to be handled up north."

"What kind of a job?" Bill asked.

"Jennings will explain when you get up there."

Bill shook his head. "Maybe I want to know from you."

Wade stiffened. "I said Jennings would explain."

"I might not want to ride north," Bill said stubbornly. "What's it all about, Wade?"

"I've no time to talk, Castlen," Jim Wade grated. "Get started."

A footstep sounded on the ground behind him and Jennings's voice reached his ears. "Anything wrong, Wade?" Jennings was asking.

They had him boxed. He was caught between them. Wade could make an issue of this now and he wouldn't have a chance. But Jim Wade was shaking his head and there was a tight, mocking look in his face.

"No," he said slowly. "No, there's nothing wrong, is there, Castlen?"

Bill Castlen shrugged. He turned abruptly and moved past Jennings toward the corral. . . .

They rode north, Riley on one side of him and Jennings on the other. Riley was a sullen, dark-faced man of about forty. He had nothing to say. And Jennings wasn't talking, either. Bill had asked what this was all about and Jennings had answered, "We're gonna meet a fellow up here. We might have a little trouble." And after

that he had shut up and refused to say any more.

They rode hard, and late in the afternoon veered a little to the west. This was a rugged, hilly country up here and the grass was poor. They passed few cattle, and saw no roads or signs of any dwellings. An hour before dusk they came to a narrow creek which carried hardly any water and as they reached it Riley spoke for almost the first time. "Another mile," he said briefly. "To the left up the creek."

"What do we find in another mile?" Bill asked.

"An old line shack, if it's still standing," Jennings replied. "We're gonna meet a man there."

"Who?" Bill demanded.

Jennings shook his head. "You ask too damn many questions, Castlen. Look over at Riley."

Bill glanced at Riley. He caught his breath. He stiffened. Riley's gun was out and was covering him. There was an ugly look on the man's face.

"Lift your hands, Castlen," Riley ordered. "Keep 'em high."

Bill raised his hands. He had played this like a fool. He had anticipated trouble but had thought Jennings would initiate it. He had tried to keep an eye on Jennings since they had started.

"Get his gun, Jennings," Riley snapped.

Jennings rode closer to Bill. He leaned forward, jerked Bill's gun from its holster and then swung it viciously at Bill's head. Bill saw the blow coming. He tried to duck but wasn't quick enough. The barrel of the gun caught him squarely across the temple and smothered his consciousness with a blinding flash of pain.

IT SEEMED to Bill Castlen that he was on a horse, a horse bigger than any horse which had ever lived, a horse which could clear a mountain at a single jump, a horse which was carrying him across country at a speed faster than the wind. He clung desperately to the saddle, gripping its immense horn with both hands. A sudden, twisting leap threw him high in the air and he was falling, falling through a vast, star-studded darkness. A scream came to his lips and he suddenly awoke.

He heard voices, men's voices, but the words which reached his ears had no meaning. His identification with the nightmare slid away. He was lying in a bunk in a small room, lying on his side. His hands were tied behind his back. There was a lamp on the table in the room. The voices came from the doorway and he turned his head and saw Riley standing there.

"I don't see why we let 'em go," Riley growled. "You might need me in Tubec. Why do I have to stay here?"

"Wade's orders," came a voice from outside, Jennings's voice. "He's got his reasons. He's got every step of this planned. You play it his way or answer to him, Riley. Hold 'em until noon tomorrow, then let 'em go an' get out fast. You know where to meet us."

"You've got it easy," said another voice. "We're takin' all the risk an' your cut is as big as ours is."

"I wasn't staked out like this at New London," Riley muttered. "I can carry my load any day in the week."

New London! That was the place. It had been in New London that Bill Castlen had seen Jim Wade, and the name Wade had been using then had been Ingersol. Harry Ingersol. He had been running a saloon. Bill had stopped there for a week while he toured the surrounding country, buying cattle for Dan Weller.

The talk in the doorway had stopped. Bill heard the sound of horses galloping away. Riley came back into the room and scowled down at him and then looked toward the other corner of the room, and Bill, staring that way, saw the figure of Dan Hogarth's daughter. She was seated on the floor. Her hands weren't showing. She was probably tied, just as he was.

There was a throbbing pain in Bill's head. He tried to figure this out but it was hard to think, hard to add things up. Why was the girl here? Where did she fit into this? Why were they to be held only until tomorrow noon and what would happen when they were released? He tugged at his bonds but the ropes were tight. It would take a long time to work free if it would ever be possible.

"Do I get a drink if I'm thirsty?" the girl asked suddenly.

Riley shook his head. "No."

"Get her one," Bill snapped.

Riley turned and glared at him. "Shut up."

"Nice fellow, isn't he," Bill called, looking over at the girl.

"Nice if you like rats," the girl answered.

Riley's head jerked from side to side as he looked from Bill to the girl. "If you two want to live," he said harshly, "quit talkin'."

"Maybe we don't want to live," Bill said promptly. "Get the girl a drink."

Riley swung toward him, clawed out his gun and swung it at Bill's head. There was no way to duck. Pain and a smothering darkness again swept over him.

* * *

How much later it was when he again recovered consciousness, Bill didn't know, but when he could see the room clearly he could tell by the way the girl's shoulders and arms were moving that she was struggling with her bonds. Riley was seated at the table playing solitaire. There was a heavy scowl on his face. The hammering pain in Bill's head was harder to bear. He tugged at his bonds but they were no looser.

"Did you get her the drink?" he asked suddenly.

"Shut up!" Riley snapped.

"He got it for me," said the girl.

"What's your name?" Bill asked. "Your first name?"

"Marie."

"Marie," Bill repeated. "Marie. I like it but I don't like your last name."

"I have a message for you," said Marie Hogarth. "A message from my father. Maybe it's not exactly a message. It's more a story. He said I was to tell it to you if I saw you again."

Riley looked around at her and the girl's shoulders stopped moving. "I told you to quit talking," Riley growled.

Marie Hogarth shook her head. "You can't stop a woman from talking. I'm going to talk. Even if you use that gun on me I'm going to talk."

Riley threw his cards down on the table. He crossed over to the wall where his coat was hanging. From a bottle in the pocket he took a long drink and afterwards he wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and scowled at the girl.

"Father told me to tell you this," Marie was saying. "The Wagonwheel ranch is yours. He's just been running it for you and is ready to make an accounting before the court. He was appointed your guardian after your folks were killed. While he was sheriff he hired a man to run the ranch, then when he quit being sheriff we moved out there, but the ranch is yours."

Bill shook his head. "I don't believe a word of it."

"There is more I can tell you," Marie continued. "The Castlens weren't rustlers, according to father. The charges against them were false. The man who could have saved them was supposed to appear in court that last day. He didn't. He was killed on the way to town. The judge was a man who hated the Castlens and who was glad of a chance to get even. He was later arrested on a charge of murder and was hanged. It was father who arrested him."

"And it was your father who blocked the escape of my folks from the courthouse," Bill said grimly.

"No. He was out there to help, to get horses. One of your brothers was killed at the window. Your father and your other brother were killed before they could reach it. Afterwards, Sam Newhouser blamed it all on a misunderstanding but he and the Castlens had always been enemies and father never believed him. Just the same, Sam Newhouser never bothered the Castlen ranch after that—never until Jim Wade went to work for him."

"Who cares about any of that?" Riley growled.

"I do," Bill Castlen snapped. "How long has Wade been around?"

"Since last winter," Marie answered.

"Did he dam Four Mile Creek?"

"Yes. And father blew the dam out."

"How many cattle have you missed."

"Several small herds. A hundred and fifty head."

Bill stared thoughtfully across the room. A hundred and fifty rustled cattle wouldn't provide much money for Wade's crowd. But rustled cattle and a fight over water would serve to forecast the possibility of a range war. And to what end? What did Wade plan to gain through the deliberate promotion of trouble?

"Who is Rex Tenney?" Bill asked suddenly.

"He works for us?" Marie answered. "I was out riding with him today when two of Wade's men met us. They—"

"Shut up!" Riley yelled. "That's all the talk I can stand."

"Did Tenney get away?" Bill asked.

Marie was frowning. "Yes. He—he seemed to expect the men. That is—"

Riley started across the room toward the bunk where Bill was. "I said shut up," he roared. "Do you want me to use this gun on you again."

He pulled the gun from his holster and stood swinging it at his side.

Back in the corner, Marie Hogarth was tugging and twisting and suddenly her hands came free. She reached into the pocket of her coat.

"Mr. Riley," she called. "Mr. Riley, will you look around?"

Riley glanced over his shoulder. Bill heard him gasp, saw him start to lift his gun, then hesitate.

"Don't try it, Mr. Riley," Marie advised. "My father taught me to shoot. I can hit the edge of a playing card at this distance. You're a lot bigger."

It wasn't a large gun which Marie was holding but her hand was steady and there was a tight, determined look on her face.

"Drop your gun, Mr. Riley," she ordered. "Drop your gun and untie Mr. Castlen. And hurry up. I'm getting nervous. This gun I'm holding might go off."

Riley drew in a long, shuddering breath. He dropped his gun and stooped over Bill Castlen and started fumbling at the knot at Bill's wrists.

## CHAPTER

### Pay-Off Day

IT WAS Riley who was now lying in the bunk. He was securely bound. Bill Castlen stood over him with a gun. Riley had refused to talk. His eyes were hard, bitter.

"Where shall I hit him, Marie?" Bill asked. "Right across the face?"

Marie nodded her head. "Yes, but don't break your gun."

"It might scar him some."

"He might look better with a scar."

Bill touched Riley's face softly with the gun. "You'd better talk, Riley," he said under his breath. "I want the whole story. If I have to hit you with this gun I'll cave your face in."

Riley bit his lips. "You kidnapped the girl," he said sullenly. "You hated her father so you kidnapped her to get even. That's the story Rex Tenney will carry to Hogarth. Hogarth and his men will ride after you and while they're doing that, Wade will clean out the Wagonwheel."

Bill shook his head. This answer had come too easily. It didn't add up heavy enough. It would take several days to round up the cattle on a range. A drive to the border would take close to a week. Wade was planning something which would work a lot faster.

"I've got it, Marie," Bill said suddenly, straightening up. "New London—Ingersol—Wade—I've got it."

Marie looked puzzled. "What do you mean? Where's New London?"

"In Idaho," Bill answered slowly. "I knew when I first saw Jim Wade that I had seen him before, somewhere, and under some other name. It was in New London. He was running a saloon. He was using the name Ingersol. I was in New London a week. Shortly after I left the bank was held up. The robbers made quite a haul. Where they came from or where they went was never figured out. The sheriff and most able-bodied men in the town were away on a wild goose chase when the hold-up occurred. The same thing is going to happen in Tubec."

Marie was staring at him, wide-eyed, startled.

"Don't you see it?" Bill insisted. "Wade and his crowd came here after that hold-up. They moved in on Sam Newhouser. They looked over the Tubec bank. They decided to crack it. They started the war with your father to build up the kind of trouble which would look natural. All Wade needed, then, was an incident which would pull as many men from Tubec as possible at the time he meant to hold up the bank. I came along and fit into that perfectly. I hated Hogarth. I kidnapped you. The whole town of Tubec joins in the posse to run me down. Wade moves in and takes over the bank. What time is it?"

The girl bit her lips. "I don't know. It must be after midnight."

Bill holstered the gun he had picked up from the floor, Riley's gun. He rolled a cigarette. It was a long distance to town, a long distance up here. Rex Tenney, who was apparently in on this with Wade, had to get to town with the story of the kidnapping. It would take a little time to raise a posse and get started. He and

Marie had been supposed to be kept here until noon tomorrow, which indicated that the posse might not get started from town until dawn. If this was the case, Wade and his men would move in on the bank in the early morning.

"We've got to get to town," Bill said to the girl. "It'll be a hard ride."

"Then let's get started," Marie said practically.

Bill nodded. He turned to the bunk and tested Riley's bonds, and then swung toward the door. Marie blew out the lamp and followed him.

* * *

It was later than midnight. It grew light in the east while they were still far from town and an hour's ride lay ahead of them when the sun came up. They separated then, Marie angling to the east and toward the road up which the posse might be heading, if they had figured this right. Bill Castlen kept straight on toward town.

He met no one. He reached the outskirts of Tubec and rode on into the square. The town seemed deserted. One saddled horse stood at a tie-rail under the trees but the man who had ridden it there was not in sight. This was early, of course, for any activity in the town, but even at this hour the place shouldn't have looked so dead.

Bill dismounted across the square from the bank. He was stiff, tired, weary from the long ride. A scowl came into his face as he started for the bank. Had he figured this right? He didn't know. If he had figured it right was he in time? He didn't know that. As he came to the bank he touched the gun in his holster, loosening it. He reached the door and opened it and stepped inside.

Sam Newhouser was here! He stood over in the corner of the room near the counter. A pipe was clenched between his teeth and he was wearing a gun and his short, stooped body held a rigid tension. The shock of seeing him here brought Bill to a stop. There was another man in the room, a thin-faced, elderly man who stood behind the counter and who seemed a little pale, a little frightened.

"Where are the others?" Newhouser asked sharply.

Bill pushed back his hat. "So you knew they were coming?"

"Where are they?"

"I don't know."

"You're like your old man," Newhouser said primly. "You're in this with them."

"If you knew what they were planning you could have warned the sheriff," Bill flared. "What side are you on, Newhouser?"

"My own." Newhouser snapped. "The side I've always been on. I settle my problems my own way."

Bill heard the sound of horses outside. He looked through the window. A crowd of men had pulled up in front of the bank. Two had stopped at one corner of the square and two were moving on to the next corner. Those who had stopped in front of the bank were dismounting. He saw Jim Wade, Wes Jennings, Soderman, Brock, Ringo Peters. Wade and Jennings were already headed for the bank door. Most of the others were following. Three men were staying back to hold the horses.

Here it was. He had figured things right. He had made it here in time but not in time to stir up any help. There was only one man to stand with him. Sam Newhouser! Sam Newhouser, who was responible for the death of his folks and who had hated the Castlens as the Castlens had hated him. He had come here to kill Newhouser and was staying to die with him. An ironic twist of fate had put them on the same side.

Bill turned and backed up to the counter and stood facing the door. There would be no talk when these men came in, he knew. The chips were down. When they saw him and saw Newhouser they would go for their guns.

"Don't get Wade," Newhouser growled. "Wade's mine."

The men were at the door now and the door was opening. They came in in a group, Wade, Jennings and Soderman together and three more behind them. They were a step into the room before they saw and recognized the two who were waiting, and for an instant they stopped, rigid, the surprise and shock of this moment showing in each face.

"You're a dead man, Wade!" Newhouser shouted.

There was no more talk. Wade clawed up his gun. Jennings' hand slapped at his holster. Soderman dropped into a crouch, his arm moving down and up again

with blinding speed. Bill heard the sharp explosion of gunfire. He drove a shot at Jennings and then another. He twisted his gun quickly toward Soderman and fired again.

Wade took a step forward and then stopped. He folded over at the waist and pitched heavily to the floor. Jennings was down on one knee. He was lifting his gun again. There was a wide, glassy look in the man's eyes. Soderman reeled against him, tripped over him and behind Soderman, Ringo Peters twisted half around and fell against the door.

Bill saw all this as clearly as though he had no part in it, as though he was observing it from a great distance away. The counter was supporting him. There was a stabbing pain in his chest and another, lower down, in his side. His gun was heavy. He could hardly hold it up and quite abruptly the figures in the doorway seemed shadowed by fog.

He aimed his gun and squeezed the trigger but the gun was empty. He drew the gun back and threw it at the men who were still on their feet, who were backing from the room. He half turned and saw Sam Newhouser on the floor. The old man was lying on his face, motionless. He was quite dead.

The counter, suddenly, would hold him up no longer. His knees folded and he slid to the floor and into the deep, foggy darkness which seemed to be spreading across it. For a time he could hear shooting from the street but the sounds of it faded away and he could hear nothing, not even the voices of the men who soon came into the bank and who stooped over him and lifted him up.

"IT'S ALWAYS been known as the Castlen ranch," Dan Hogarth was saying. "Some folks, of course, referred to it as the Wagonwheel, but if you look up the Wagonwheel brand you'll find that it's registered in the name of Bill Castlen. I just sort of managed the place. And I wasn't in town the night you got here or you would never have gone to work for Jim Wade."

"It was Wade's men who shot at me," Bill said slowly. "They shouted your name."

Dan Hogarth nodded. "That must have been it."

This was a pleasant room Bill was in. It had been his room, long ago, but he remembered it only vaguely. He stared up at the ceiling. He had heard, the day before, the story of the end of the fight at the bank, the story of how Marie had met the posse and sent them back to town. They had made it in time to finish what he and Sam Newhouser had started. Wade's crowd had come to a sudden end in the trail. And it had happened on a Thursday, a second Bloody Thursday in Four Mile Castlen history.

"This is your ranch, Bill," Dan Hogarth was saying. "We're glad you've come home."

Bill shook his head. "I've got a job up in Idaho."

"Not as important as this one."

"But it is."

Dan Hogarth turned toward the door. He said, "Fight it out with Marie. You might as well learn early in life just who is the boss."

Bill Castlen grinned at that. He was still grinning when Marie came in and the scowl on her face didn't frighten him even a little bit.

"Father tells me you're being stubborn," Marie said from the doorway. "I won't tolerate a stubborn man. You get no dessert tonight."

"I'll have my dessert," Bill answered, "if I have to walk to the kitchen and dish it up myself."

"Then I'll not make any."

"If you don't, I will."

Marie laughed at him. She said, "I'd like to see you working in the kitchen. I'd just love that!"

She crossed the room and stood for a moment looking out of the window.. Bill wondered how much longer his wounds would keep him in bed. It was amazing, he decided, how well he had fit into this family, how completely at home he already felt. He might go back to Idaho but he knew it would be only for a visit.

Marie turned around and stared at him. "Do you still want to fight?" she demanded.

Bill Castlen shook his head. "Not now, but just wait until I'm up. You're going to have your hands full, young lady."

THE END

# Hoss Greer's Gun-

A

**Hoss Greer Saga**

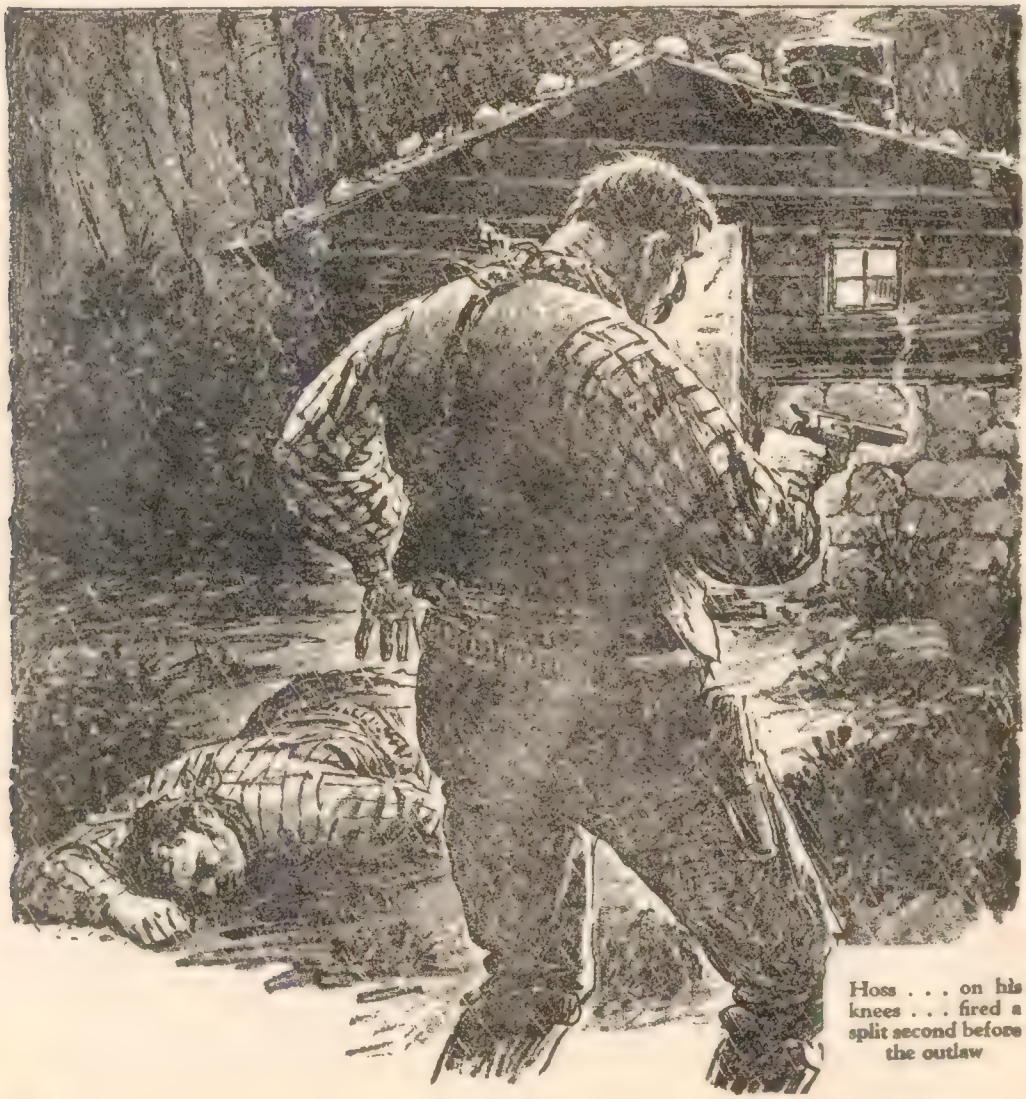
**By**

**Harry F. Olmsted**

## CHAPTER ONE

### Death from the Dark

IT HAPPENED in the Year of the Great Drought, when creeks and springs dried up for the first time in history; when every bush on the lower ranges held the skin and bones of a dead cow critter and hundreds of cattlemen went broke. At the height of the disaster, the



Hoss . . . on his knees . . . fired a split second before the outlaw

# smoke Resurrection

Annual Round-up of the Bronc-Stompers' Association met in Flagstaff. Hoss Greer, a lifetime vice-president, went up, but there were many who didn't attend. The round-up was a sad affair, and when it was over Hoss and a few cronies rode southward, stopping over at Juniperville for a few drinks and a little poker. They played and drank with Tommy Givens, the town sage; Sam Pete Moran, the sheriff, and a few other old reliables who talked their language. They got along good together.

Six of them were sitting around the stud table in Billy Parmenter's Corral Bar that sultry evening, trying vainly to forget what was happening in the lower country. Lightning flashed along Rawhide Ridge and the Bradshaws and thunder boomed. The wind whined along Frontier Street, carrying the hint of rain and clouds of dust ten months dry. Hoss, unduly restless, kept glancing toward the door, his nostrils flaring as if

**Hoss heard Preacher Bugbee sprinkle dirt onto the coffin's top, and he stared down at the cheap pine box that held the best partner a fighting man ever had. It was then that the famous gun-boss of Tres Alamos decided to stage a preview of Judgment Day—when the grave would give up its dead and the fearsome voice of a blazing .45 would call the last tally of bushwhack sinners!**

he keened the air for the thing all men in the Territory were aching for. "If it only would," he muttered once. Then, to himself: "If it would only bust loose an' come down in the middle."

Tommy Givens looked up at him, his lips smiling, his eyes dull with the stricken look that was general, from the Colorado to the Frisco, from Grand Canyon to the Mexican border and beyond. He lifted his glass. "There's still night and day, brother, both sweet things; sun and moon and stars, brother, all sweet things; there's likewise rain in God's Heaven, and wind. Life is very sweet, brother; who would wish to die? Post your ante, brother, and you won't have so many chips."

Hoss grunted, tossed in a chip. Sheriff Sam Pete said, "Leave it to Tommy to come up with the musical words. You oughta bin a poet, Tommy, but I'll go along with you on one thing. Bad as it gets, I can't imagine myself wantin' to die. Yep, life's sweet, all right. Bettin' five."

They laughed, but there was no laughter in Hoss. Almost nervously, he glanced out front as a gust of wind shook the door. And thus he was first to see the big man push the panel open and stand framed in the door, looking over the gathering with bitter, blood-shot eyes. Behind him stood three hard-faced men.

Hoss started and looked with narrowed eyes at the big-bodied, swarthy man in the entrance. The man was in his middle forties and the unkempt hair peeking from under his floppy, dust-powdered black hat showed streakings of silver. His black eyes peered from under shaggy brows that met above the bridge of a hawk-like nose. His wide lips were flattened cynically, partly hidden by a drooping mustache. A scar, running downward from his left eye, showed stark against his olive skin. Hoss sucked in a long breath and dropped his eyes to his cards. Sheriff Sam Pete bellowed an order to the men in the doorway.

"Fer God's sake, shut that door! Come in or go out but let's have a little less dust in here."

The man in the doorway moved in. A sneer twisted his lips as he bent a look at the lawmen. "Another county heard from," he gruffed. "Damned if it ain't gettin' so a man can't enjoy a drink without havin' the flavor spoilt by lookin' at a sheriff. Uncork some bourbon, Billy, an' I don't mean Injun likker."

He led the way to the bar and Hoss murmured, "How long since Zeke Zachert got out of Yuma, Moran? I thought he was doin' a life stretch."

The sheriff grimaced, spat. He said softly, "Some Phoenix shyster got him out. Worked on the governor through vote-controllin' politicians. Governor pardoned Zeke." He looked hard at Hoss. "Fer cripe's sake, don't start nothin' with him in here! Yuma never changed Zeke none, except for the worse. I'm tryin' to give him every chance an' I'm too good a friend of Bill Parmenter's to wish a Hoss Greer ruckus onto his place. Take it easy."

"Don't worry, Sam Pete. If Zeke behaves himself, my gun stays put. How long's he bin out?"

"Couple or three months, I reckon."

"He used to operate down around the Tonto. What's he doin' up here?"

"Cattle," the lawman grunted. "He done bought up three-four small outfits soon as he got out. Paid cash, I understand, though at least three of them little fencers quit the range like heel flies was devilin' 'em. Reckon Zeke musta dug up some of the cash he's supposed to uh lifted from the Globe-Phoenix stage."

"Likely." Hoss brooded and the game languished as the players listened to the loud talk and raucous laughter of Zeke and his men. Hoss said, "An' likely them missin' cowfolks are feedin' buzzards in some drygulch. Zeke bin a good boy, far as you know?"

"I'm waitin' fer his first bust-loose, Hoss," said Sam Pete, grimly. "You see, our range here's bin hit easier than most by drought. All of us has a heap uh fat yearlin' stuff that'll be the same as gold money, what with most ranchers gatherin' bones. A check-up now an' again shows uncommonly high losses, but nothin' pointin' the finger at Zeke."

Tommy Givens hummed a little tune. "He has no malice in his mind, no ruffles on his shirt. Fill every beaker up, my men, pour forth the cheering wine. There's life and strength in every drop—thanksgiving to the vine." He leaned across the table to fill the glasses. "Hist, here comes Caesar! Alas, I would not live always where storm after storm rises dark o'er the way."

Zeke Zachert's long spurs rang as he crossed the room and paused beside the table, looking down at the players. "I don't suppose the Old Ladies Auxiliary would like a he-man poker player to set in an' show 'em the game. No, of course not. Well, no harm askin'." He paused, his eyes boring into Hoss's. "Damned if it ain't my old friend, Hoss Greer. Small world, ain't it, Hoss?"

THE face of the Tres Alamos man went an ash gray and his blue eyes were bleak. His lips scarcely moved as he spoke. "Zachert, when I had you sent up for killin' one of my cowhands, I thought we'd healed up a runnin' sore on the range. Except for a clever lawyer, you'd uh hung—an' high. I suppose the same shyster got you out. Them gents don't work for nothin' an' you ain't the sort to pay bills like that out of your own pocket. Watch where you reach for it, fella. If I have to, I'll take your trail again, Zeke, an' if I should, no lawyer can help where I'll send you. Understand? An' all the gun-beauts you pick up won't save you a damned thing out of the wreckage."

Zeke looked sour. "You was lucky once," he admitted, "but now you're ridin' on a dead gun rep. I owe you a pistol whuppin', mister, but I ain't never picked on a childish ol' man an' I'm not startin' now."

"Don't be sentimental, Zeke." Hoss was smiling now. "Draw when an' if you feel lucky."

"Draw hell!" Sam Pete Moran stood up belligerently. "Zachert, you ain't forgot our talk when you first showed here. I want to see you make good. I'm givin' you ever' chance. But you know the ordinance about wearin' guns. Get that 'un offa yore hams an' check 'er with Billy, yonder. Pick it up when you leave town. An' the same goes for yore gun riders."

Zeke's great shoulders shifted restlessly; a sneer grew on his lips. "I don't obey no law that's made for some an' ignored by others. Lookit Greer; he ain't checked no gun. Nor I ain't neither. An'," his eyes flashed hungrily, "if you think you got enough help to enforce so crummy a law, commence. Come on, boys!" He turned on his heel and went out, his followers behind him.

At the table, Hoss said, "Looks like I sorta messed you up, Sam Pete. You shoulda told me. Zeke's right. A law that don't work both ways is no good."

Sam Pete caught his arm, patently embarrassed. "This law," he said, "is made fer things like Zachert, not fer law-abidin' citizens. Anyway, Hoss, I look on you as one uh my deppities when yo're in my scope uh country. No, the disarmin' ordinance ain't made tuh work both ways, not —hey! What's that?"

Through the drone of the wind and the far muttering of thunder came the echo of a gunshot. Another. Then a sharp, staccato fusillade. Sam Pete rose, his face twisted with rage. "Excuse me, boys," he said, and his gun flipped out. He spun the cylinder and checked the action. "It's time I showed them coyotes who's boss around here. Deal me out for a couple hands."

Hoss shoved his chair back. "I'll go with you."

"Set where you are, Hoss." The lawman glared at Greer. "When the time arrives that I can't hold down my job, I'll toss in my star an' quit. Be right back." He holstered the gun and strode from the saloon. And Hoss, understanding the principle better than most, sighed and dropped into his seat.

"Damned stubborn ol' coot!" he muttered. "What's he think friends is for?"

Tommy Givens seemed to have shrunk as he let his eyes touch the faces of his friends. "Some people," he said morosely, "are so fond of ill luck that they run half way to meet it. Hoss, uncork that bottle. Jim, it's your deal."

Half-heartedly, they played the two hands Sam Pete had asked to be dealt out. Their glances were mostly toward the door now as they labored through a couple more deals. Then Hoss tossed his cards in. "To hell with this!" he growled. "I'm going out. They could beat Sam Pete's head off and we'd still be fiddlin' away time with these ten-cent antes. Go ahead if you like it."

"Moran will be fit to tie, Hoss," put in Jim Egbert, boss of the Rocking E, "if you scramble his play. Let him work it out."

"Let tomorrow take care of tomorrow," hummed Tommy Givens. "Leave things of the future to Fate."

"Humph!" barked Hoss, and he was moving doorward when, sharp and strident through the night, came the report of a

gunshot. It brought Hoss up short, listening. Clashing voices struck faintly into the saloon, followed by two more shots. Jim Egbert hollered, "He's into it! Come on!"

Hoss was running, loosening his gun in its leather. As he hit the door and barged outside a wild rebel yell, shrill and terrible, knifed down the wind. The swift beat of hoofs sounded. Hoss piled into the middle of the street. Far down, near the Wallapai House, he caught the movement of riders in a sudden flash of distant lightning. He leveled his gun and sent two bullets winging toward them, knowing the range was too long. Then he was in action again, his strong legs pumping him along the street.

Men were tumbling from saloons and houses, calling to one another in the darkness. Hoss ignored them. His eyes, straining through the gloom, picked up that dark blot on the dusty road. He raced to it, plowed to a halt and dropped to one knee. Sam Pete lay face down in the street. His gun was in his hand. Sam Pete was dead!

## CHAPTER TWO

### Call for a Gun Doctor

A LOT of different kinds of people came to Sam Pete's funeral. Cowfolks, gamblers, dirt farmers, outlaws, women from Juniperville's redlight row, Chinese who catered to the rangeland's appetite for well-cooked food. Not a one but had, in some manner, benefitted by contact with the dead sheriff.

Neighbors and friends, men and women who had pioneered this country. Some of them well off in this world's goods; some with nothing more than they wore and rode. All had the same thing in their hearts: respect, sorrow and homage for a pioneer who had crossed the Great Divide.

There was a saloonman from Flag, a man who had scouted for Crook. A judge from Phoenix, who had one time partnered with Sam Pete, down around Wagonhub. A broken down bullwhacker. A millionaire mining man from Bobcat. A stage driver who had tooled a Concord from Tucson to Yuma, when the *coyoteros* were a red scourge. A Basque sheepherder. Arizona's leading medico, who owed his learning to the deceased.

People in buggies, wagons, phaetons, surries and a-horse followed the plumed hearse out of town and onto the oak-bordered flat where headboards peeked from moisture-starved weeds through unpainted wood pickets and an occasional rusty grill. Juniperville's Boothill! Vehicles were emptied here and the people gathered about the grave hewn from the caliche base.

Preacher Bugbee, long a circuit rider in upland Arizona, took his stand at the coffin's side, his long face made more morose by his honest grief. He opened his Bible and he had to lift it close to his eyes, so dark was it swiftly becoming. Not the darkness of the hour, but a gloom born of thickening clouds that dropped curling and writhing against the backdrop of the brushy hills.

"Dearly beloved," his voice had been made harsh by long years of shouted exhortations, "we are gathered here in the sight of Jehovah to lay away the mortal shell of a dearly loved brother. . . ."

He did no shouting now. The words seemed to tumble from him tremulously, as he spoke a eulogy that came from his great heart. And, stirring though those words were, they failed to pierce the iron shield Hoss Greer held before him. He needed no thought-out or spoken eulogy for Sam Pete. He had lost a friend, a companion of his earliest days in the Territory. A man he had never found wanting or remiss. The passing left him desolate, lonely and abandoned. He felt resentment too, but this he had crowded into some remote cell of his brain, holding it cornered there, at bay.

A certain wonder held his mind, a wonder he had felt before when he was caught by the elemental tune played on the pines by a giant wind, by the shaking of the earth as a mighty flood thundered down the Gila or the Salt, by the mystery of life at the birth of a colt or a calf-critter. This time it was the sudden hush, as if nature held its breath as the sky pilot said the words that consigned Sam Pete Moran to the ground.

Vaguely, through the lattice of his thoughts, Hoss heard Preacher Bugbee's closing words: ". . . and so, dear friend, we consign thee to enternal rest. Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Amen." Hoss heard him sprinkle dirt onto the coffin top. Then, as if freed from its spell, Nature loosed its forces. The wind struck through

the trees with redoubled fury. The gloom was rent by a blinding streak of white light. The ground trembled. Thunder crashed across the dark sky. The rain came, torrents of rain—driving rain that pelted and stung the mourners.

There was an instant scattering to the doubtful shelter of the vehicles. The preacher tucked his Bible under his threadbare broadcloth and sprinted for his mule. Even the two Mexicans, hired to dig and fill the grave, scooted for cover. Only Hoss was left beside the open grave. He seemed not to know that buggies and wagons were pulling out, the drivers lashing the horses.

Greer stood there, savoring the rain, grateful for the chill of it as it seeped through his clothes. He tipped his face up, letting the ran wash away a sudden rush of tears to his eyes. "God," he murmured. "God!"

Hoss rode back into town, drenched and chilled, yet happy. He could not have expressed his feeling about Sam Pete's death and the coming of the range-saving rain. But in him was little doubt that they were closely related. That idea gave him comfort.

THERE was no room in Hoss's thoughts for the fact that Tommy Givens and Jim Egbert and his other cronies had deserted him at the graveside. But now that he was back in town, his horse sheltered in a stable stall, he found himself wondering where they were. He went to the Corral Bar to look for them. They were not there and Billy Parmenter had no idea of their whereabouts. So Hoss stood beside the roaring stove and dried out, silently figuring on his next move. That he would go after Sam Pete's slayer, there was no doubt. The only question was, how? In his own mind, Zeke Zachert was guilty. The renegade, freshly pardoned, would hardly be so bold as to smugly return to his headquarters in the Juniper country. And, with the fiendish luck so often favoring the lawless, this rain would wash out all tracks.

So ran Hoss's mind as he stood there by the Corral Bar stove. There Tommy, Jim and his other friends found him. Their desertion had been willful. They had been busy. The poet came leading the group, his round, comical, vein-netted face abeam with satisfaction, his arms outstretched. "Ah, Greer, I come not here your mourning hour to sadden, a limping pilgrim leaning on a staff. I, who never deem it sin to gladden this vale of sorrows with a wholesome laugh. My friend, you are called to high places."

"My friend." There was a sparkle in Hoss's eye as he glowered at the little man who had memorized the words of the masters and bent them to his own purposes. "Only a man who has mastered the art of drinking whiskey could learn such drivel, let alone find constant use for it. Called? Sure. So are you. And everybody here. The high place is the bar. I'm buying."

"Later, Hoss." That was Zach Porter, the town saddler. "In plain cow country lingo, what Tommy means is that the commissioners are meetin'. Emergency. They're appointin' somebody to wear Sam Pete's badge. They want to see you—now."

Hoss scowled, eyeing one, then another. "What you boys bin up to? That's out. Go back an' tell 'em no."

Momentary silence, then Jim Egbert spoke up. "Sam Pete's passin' has hit us a dirty rap, Hoss. An' his killer rides free, an' mebbyso stays that-away unless somebody that knows how takes after him. It can be just that temporary, if you like, but give us the benefit of your experience, won't you? We'll support you to the plumb limit. Every man in this scope uh country will ride behind you. Zachert's gotta be made an example of, Hoss, an' the governor's gotta be showed what happens when he pardons a dirty killer. Come talk to the commissioners anyway."

"Hell, I don't even live in the county."

"Don't have to, Hoss. They taken care of that item. An' anyway, the business may cover a heap uh counties. You can't live in 'em all. Come on."

They ganged up in their pleading and Hoss, against his better judgment, gave in. Together, through the steadily falling rain, they walked to Carter's Hall, where the commissioners were waiting. The minute Hoss crossed the threshold their eyes were on him and each one of these elected representatives of the people felt the hard impact of his personality.

Hoss was then thirty-nine—old, as men are rated on the cattle ranges. He was known from one corner of the Southwest

to the other—a fearless killer who, when he believed the law impotent or remiss, took the administration of justice into his own hands. He faced them now, looking from one official to the other with a cold impersonalness and an air of faint annoyance. A man in the full flush of his strength, vigor and reputation. Five ten and a half in his sock feet. One hundred and sixty-five pounds of bone, muscle and sinew.

His legs were bowed, his hips slender, his shoulders sloping sharply from the strong column of his neck. His features were sharp, deeply bronzed. His eyes, as they looked at him, were his most arresting characteristic. Of the faded cobalt blue men call gray, they had a painful stabbing quality that made men shift from it. Right now, they held a hint of the cold inhumanity that had built him into a legend over the years.

"I'm Hoss Greer," he announced, not unpleasantly. "You wanted to see me?"

Mayor Foster, the town medico, came to his feet. "Thanks for coming, Greer. We've lost our sheriff under regrettable circumstances. For protection, if for nothing else, we must fill the office. Your friends have made a strong case in your behalf. The pay is two hundred a month. We have voted a five thousand dollar reward for Sam Pete's killer, dead or alive. The job will be difficult, with the crooks shooting at you with golden bribes or lead bullets."

HOSS inclined his head soberly. It was an old story to him, one that seldom changed. What the mayor had to say about it was of little importance to him. His mind ran far ahead, where killers—God knew how many—made swift horse tracks along a muddy trail leading to some remote hide-away. But which one? Along the backbone of the Arizona uplands were splendid hide-aways for an owlhoot brotherhood. Hoss knew them all. Hell Corral, Rock Cabin, Frog Tanks, Horse Mesa, Lookout Point. Each was a possibility but, in reaching out for the one Zeke might select to hole up in until this latest killing blew over, Hoss's thoughts instinctively turned to Zeke's former scene of operations, Tonto Basin.

In Hoss's book, Zeke was no man to den up like a bear and idle the thing out. An energetic and restless spirit would drive him to continued and perhaps more desperate outlawry. And where better than a place intimately known to him, one of the most favored spots for grass and water in the dried-up territory? Now that the rains had come, cleaned-out cowmen would be crying for stock, and few if any questions asked, price no object. Zeke stood to strike real pay dirt if he worked the Tonto carefully and well.

The idea of the Tonto brought up the bordering Mazatzals and Halfway House, an abandoned monument to the Apache campaigns, on the Old Reno Pass military road. Yes, snap judgment made Halfway House a good bet.

The mayor's words struck through the heavy curtain of Hoss' thinking. ". . . so, if you see fit to take the job, Greer, this commission pledges money and men, transportation and supplies for what may be the biggest manhunt since Geronimo. We'll never quit till we've shown the world the price of killing a Juniperville sheriff. We're a might jealous outfit when it comes to our friendship for Sam Pete."

Hoss shifted. "He was my friend too, gentlemen. For many, many years."

"So we understand, Greer. Then you'll take it?"

"On my terms, gentlemen. My authority must be final. No interference. No backbiting because I didn't follow somebody else's plan. I quit when I've had enough and my wages—not less than one month's pay—sent now to the Charity Fund, Bronc Stompers' Association, Phoenix. That's it, gentlemen. I'm no politician."

The mayor's face twisted with restrained mirth. "Nor would we want you if you were, Greer. There's a debt we must pay to Sam Pete. Politics can wait that payment. I'm empowered by this board to accept any terms you choose to impose. There will be no papers to sign; let our given word be the contract. Tomorrow morning, you can pick your lieutenants and plan the campaign. Satisfactory?"

"Satisfactory." Hoss turned on his heel and they watched him stride out, pulling on his floppy, smoke-stained Stetson, his run-over Hyers clicking in his stiff-legged walk. Tommy Givens and Jim Egbert followed him, overtaking him as he stood at the desk of the Wallapai House, register-

ing. They wanted to talk ways and means, and Hoss humored them. They sat in the deep leather chairs, smoking and exchanging comments. And it was noteworthy that Tommy and Jim did almost all the talking. Hoss sat with his face tipped down, his mind far, far away.

At last Jim Egbert rose, yawning. "Big day tomorrow," he announced. "I'm hittin' the hay. See you at breakfast, boys."

They watched him climb the winding staircase and then Tommy Givens changed. He squared around to face Hoss and for perhaps the first time Hoss saw deep into the soul of this little man. His face was suddenly lined. He looked old, tired and beaten.

"You're tired, old friend," he said. "And I'll only keep you a minute. I believe I know you better than most. You'll toss advice to the jaybirds and do your do without fear or favor. But don't forget me, Hoss. Make me a partner in your plans and I'll be proud, maybe the first pride I've ever known. Take me with you, partner."

"Can't that wait till morning, Tommy?"

"No. My life's been one long blank, Hoss. I've tried for years, unsuccessfully, to drink up Arizona's whiskey supply. I've played the clown, learning and quoting the words of great men. And all the while I've envied men who did noble things, men like you and Sam Pete. It's time, before they lay me away, that I tasted the real thing. Danger? It will be a tonic. Death? Only true friends will mourn me, and those more fully that I met it bravely. Think of it tonight, Hoss. Sleep on it. And if you can put me at your side and stake me to one fair shot at Zeke Zachert, I'll damn well thank you."

Hoss grinned at him, surprised and a little pleased. "Well, Tommy, I wouldn't have believed it. Sure, I'll sleep on it. Now get on to bed. You'll need something more than whiskey if you ride at my side. Get along wth you, fella."

Tommy grinned, shook hands. He walked out the front door, his shoulders squared, his head held a little higher. Hoss sighed, waited a few moments, took a last drag at his cigarette and climbed the stairs. In the upper hall, he did not turn into the room he had hired for the night. He kept on straight back, let himself out a door that gave onto a landing and softly descended the outer staircase. He paused at the bottom, turning up his coat collar against the falling rain, then stepped briskly down the alley. Turning into the stable, he saddled his Blue Crane, donned his slicker and led the animal outside. A moment later, he was loping along the alley and out of Juniperville, heading toward the distant hills.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Man and Ghost in Reno Pass

DAYLIGHT caught Hoss bucking a cold headwind, a slippery, treacherous trail winding sharply upward and alternate flurries of rain, sleet and snow. He was chilled to the core but, in a manner he had learned early in life, he forced the physical misery into the far recesses of his consciousness and kept his reluctant animal to the task.

The hours dragged past, with no lifting of the clouds, no slackening of the downpour that would fill the creeks and swell the rivers and bring blessed relief to a drought-stricken range. Come noon, he was within a mile of Hidden Cabin—once the hole-up of Manuel Costa—an accomplished horse-thief. Costa had been trapped and slain there by Commodore Owens. It was near enough to the Tonto to make the chance something he could not ignore. So he turned Blue Crane up Wild Rose Canyon a mile or so, tied his mount and toiled up a soggy ridge to a place where he could see the cabin, nestling among the alders and water maples in a bend of the roaring creek.

No smoke came from the rock-and-mud chimney. This didn't satisfy Hoss, so he hunkered there, tormented by cold and hunger, smoking cigarettes and watching the place intently. When, after an hour, there had been no sign or sound of occupants, he descended to the trail and led his pony to the cabin. It showed no evidence of recent occupation. In covered lard pails were still some of the food items stored and left by the Mexican outlaw who had slept under the mound, not a rod from the door. Hoss got a fire going, prepared a meal, thawed out and dried his clothing. In a lean-to shed was a little hay, cut on the meadow by Costa. Having stabled his pony here and feeling the need of sleep, he carried

his saddle inside to dry and curled up on the floor before the stove. It was ten or twelve hours to Halfway House. Whatever was there must wait.

There was a lot of sighing, moaning and reverberations which a superstitious man might have interpreted as the work of a restless ghost, but Hoss slept undisturbed, never waking until the pallid dawn of the next morning struck through gaps in the pole walls. He was stiff with cold, hungry as a wolf but fully rested and ready to resume his quest. The rain had ceased but the clouds hung low in a blanketing fog, threatening more precipitation before the storm spent itself.

He ate again, baked a few extra flapjacks for his saddle pockets and lit out. Where the faint canyon trace met the main trail, he drew rein, a frown of annoyance creasing his forehead. There, made since the last downpour, were the tracks of a lone shod pony—traveling fast. Now who would that be? Some one of Zeke's men, probably. Carrying his chief the word that Hoss had been appointed sheriff, that he had vanished from Juniperville and was on a still manhunt. That was bad. The odds had lengthened against the Tres Alamos man. Zeke would be doubly on guard now, or . . . or Hoss might overtake the messenger and. . . .

From Blue Crane, Hoss called for more speed than the state of the trail warranted. Many times the sure-footed cutting horse slipped, recovered miraculously and slogged on. It came on to rain again and, on a shoulder of white clay hogback called Chalk Ridge, the animal lost footing on a lard-slick slope, crashed heavily to its side and rolled a half hundred feet before triplet pines halted him at the edge of a hundred-foot drop. Hoss, thrown clear, slid down the greasy slant, bringing up in a manzanita clump. He was unhurt, save for scratches and bruises, but he was a mess of white mud and he was mad, yelling, cursing mad, as he eased over to help his struggling mount.

It could have been so costly, that spill, but that it wasn't Hoss took as an omen when his anger cooled. It took him an hour, carefully leading the frightened horse back to the trail, where each step threatened to start them sliding to ruin, and to scrape that slimy, clinging mud from his person, from the pony and rig. When he again took the trail, he knew his chance of overtaking the rider ahead was gone. And so it turned out. Hoss never at any time had a glimpse of him, though at times, as the clouds broke in the afternoon, he could see several miles of the trail winding along the mountain face.

NIGHTFALL caught him nearing the main Mazatzal Ridge, five miles from his goal. A bitter wind whirled in a fine rain that stung like needles. It grew black and the horse moved slowly, testing the footing at each step. It took him three hours to make that five miles and now he sat his saddle, looking down into the trough where led the old Reno Trail, eyeing the single light that glowed like a beacon from a window of Halfway House. He had guessed right.

Hoss put his pony into the trail, dismounting and tying the animal a couple of hundred yards from the long-abandoned hostelry. Carefully he moved down-trail until he stood in the deep gloom of young pines not a hundred feet from the place. Here he paused and not until now did he give thought to how he would approach it and what he must do in order to justify his long ride.

At a hitchpole before the entrance was a knot of ponies. Hoss shifted position three times before he had them counted. There were eleven. His first thought was that those ponies would not be tied there if Zeke and his men were expecting gunplay. But wouldn't they? His knowledge of the feral mind seized upon the idea. No doubt the door was unlocked, an invitation for the manhunters to come face to face with waiting guns. And these killers would be slyly smiling as they waited. Hoss had one bad moment, then shook it off. He had cast the dice. Fate would decide it. He commenced a slow and deliberate advance, step by step, toward that doorway.

He was within three rods of the entrance when a sound halted him, a sound so filled with terror it sent waves of chills crawling up and down his spine. He dropped to one knee, his gun in his hand, his jaw lax with astonishment. The night suddenly vibrated with a blood-curdling scream that rose and fell and suddenly became words. . . .

"Suffer, Zeke, suffer, suffer, suffer! I've

come to torment you, Zeke. I'll haunt you at night. Every night."

It ceased and the silence was painful. Then a tumult of men's voices rose, coming from the old way station.

"Ghosts. The damned place is haunted! I want no part of it!"

"Me neither. I'll face anything livin', with guns. But how can you gun a damned ghost?"

"I'm scairt, Zeke. I'm takin' off."

Bawled cursing silenced them. "You damned simple-minded fools! That's no ghost. There ain't no such a thing." It was Zeke and, after a momentary pause, he shouted, "Who done that? Sing out, damn yuh. Give out with more uh that hauntin' an' I'll bullet yore gizzard. Who said that?"

"It's Sam Pete, Zeke. Come back to make your nights a hell on earth."

It was hardly more than a whispered croak, nor could one tell with any certainty from whence it came. It ended in a ghastly groan that shook Hoss's doubt of things supernatural. Never a superstitious man, his would have been the first voice uplifted against the idea of a disembodied spirit. Yet. . . .

The groan had hardly ceased when yells of terror broke from the frightened outlaws and they came tumbling out of the old stage station like terrified chickens. Blocked in the doorway, struggling there, some went down and others fell over them. Hurling themselves up, howling like maniacs racing to their racked ponies. Laughter followed them, wild laughter which added to their panic. In a matter of seconds they were a-horse, rolling their spurs, their ponies throwing gouts of mud as they galloped furiously into the timber. In sixty seconds it was all over, sounds of their precipitate flight dying away in the distance.

Hoss remained where he was, his nerves still shaken by what he had heard, his mind reaching out for a logical answer. There was silence in the house, too, and Hoss could look into the gaping door and see a bit of the barren interior without a thing to suggest human occupancy except the wan, guttering light that must have come either from a fire on the hearth or a candle, or maybe both.

Then he heard a low curse of hopelessness and he had a fleeting glimpse of Zeke Zachert as he strode to the door and slammed it. Hoss listened in vain for the throwing of a bolt or a lock lever. And, left in darkness again, save for the faint glow striking from a sack-draped aperture, Hoss still delayed, thinking of that spectral voice and of the ancient structure from which it seemed to have come.

The old place was partly of native logs, partly of the rocks that made up the hills. It backed up against an overhanging cliff which barred rear entry. The roof was of long, heavy pines covered with rock and gravel. Its tiny windows had looked out upon scenes to stir the blood. Its solitary door had known the passage of men who had written history in Arizona and elsewhere. Soldiers, statesmen, frontiersmen and daring adventurers.

It took no great flight of imagination to hear the voices of those it had sheltered in the soughing of the pines, in the endless murmuring of the tumbling creek, yonder. Voices murmuring secret stories involving greats and near-greats who had halted here on their perilous way across the hostile Indian country. Voices seemingly apologizing for the present neglect, for housing robbers and renegades and killers.

NOW Hoss knelt there in the mud that had felt the tires of straining Concords, of the shod hoofs of questing cavalry troops and the splayed hoofmarks of attacking Apache warriors. And he was straining his ears to that murmuring, reaching for another word, just one, from the thing calling itself Sam Pete's ghost. Off to his left, a faint *squish* of mud arrested his attention, swiveled his head. He saw the shadowy figure emerge from the deep gloom beyond the corner of the building, glide along the front, pause before the door and then fling it open.

For just an instant, Hoss saw him limned there against the light—a short, pudgy figure in black slicker, a black scarf drawn over his face. A gun glittered in his hand as he plunged inside and out of Hoss's vision. Hoss leaped to his feet and lunged toward the door this invader had left open. And, as he moved, he heard the slickered man croak, "All right, Zeke, you yellow-backed sidewinder! I'm repping for Sam Pete Moran. Fill your hand!"

Hoss cleared the threshold, leaping, turned hard left. The squat, masked man was planted, gun leveled, right before him. Still in full motion, Hoss's gun rose and fell, the muzzle smashing down on the man's floppy hat, thudding off his skull. He broke at the knees and fell without a moan. Hoss plowed to a halt, staring. Between him and the fire on the ash-littered hearth stood Zeke Zachert. The badman stood lax and bewildered, hands down, eyes mournful, his holstered gun on the scarred half-log mantelpiece. Hoss's voice was hard.

"A mite careless of you, Zeke, shucking your iron when you knew I'd be callin'. No? This imposter, whoever he is, ain't reppin' for Sam Pete. I am. I'm here to kill you or to take you back to Juniperville to hang. How'll you have it?"

The killer looked pitiable. He grimaced and it was neither in fear nor anger. He spoke but one word, and that whisperingly: "Please." He nudged his elbow toward the fireplace. Looking past him, Hoss saw that blankets were spread there. On that pallet, in the full heat of the coals, lay a woman of many, many years. Her head lay on a soiled pillow, in a tangle of white hair. The face, turned upward to the sooted and cob-webbed logs, was parched brown skin drawn tightly over bone.

Hoss said, "Who's that?"

"My grandmother, Greer. She's over a hundred, and she's dying. For God's sake keep your voice down. My mother died when I was born. Granny's raised me an' she thinks I'm the best man ever was borned. Leave me stay here with her till she. . . . she's gone. I give you my word that I'll—"

"Your word ain't worth a plugged Mex centavo, Zeke."

"I know. But for whatever it's worth, I swear I'll not move against you or try to escape."

Hoss looked deep into his eyes, and he saw there something he had not suspected. When the Sky Boss dealt out the man stuff, He short-changed Zeke. What the man didn't know about working cattle or combing out a bronc never was written into the book. Water, he opined, was for washing feet, whiskey for drinking. Loyalty and honor were signs of weakness by his rule. Most cowmen owned too many critters or hired too few punchers, so their beef was fair prey for a smarter hawss-an'-rope man. Unimaginative, secure within the walls of his senses, he had always reveled in his vices, boasted of his treacheries. Yet here he was, close to tears, already mourning that pitiful old creature on the pallet.

These things Hoss read in him and he nodded, holstered his iron and moved on tiptoe to the bedside. And even as he looked down upon the crone, she opened sunken eyes, searched his face and tried to smile. "You," she whispered, "you're the doctor, ain't you?"

"Yes, Granny," the killer husked. "This is Doctor Greer."

The old woman murmured. "I'm obliged for you coming clean out here to treat me, Doctor, but it's no use. Dear Zeke should uh knowed that, but he's allus bin so good, so dear, so plumb thoughtful. My favorite grandson, an' better'r ary son could be to an ailin' ol' woman." She halted, sighed. "So weak, Doctor, so turrible weak. Take my word, don't never live to be a hundred an' three."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### What Happened at Halfway House

THE old woman dozed. The fire burned low and Zeke got up to fuel it. As the flame sprang up, Hoss noticed tears on the weathered cheeks of the hardened killer, and marveled. Treacherous, unclean, cruel as a mountain cat, Zeke had a human side that Hoss hadn't suspected.

The masked man lying on the floor moaned and stirred. Hoss said, "Go get his gun, Zeke."

That request, more than anything that could be said of him, revealed the grim thinking of this fearless cowman. He had told Zeke that he'd come to kill him or to take him back to Juniperville to hang. But in reality, he had come here to kill him. The governor's parden rankled in him. He had no assurance, save in the gun at his hip, that Zeke wouldn't find some new way, through his slick shyster lawyer, to cheat the law again. He was hoping, as Zeke rose without comment and moved to the fallen man's side, that he'd lift the and turn it upon his captor.

But Zeke did nothing of the kind. He picked up the gun, and without looking at it, returned to the fire and handed it to Hoss, butt first. Hoss put the weapon in his pocket. You're a hog for punishment, Zeke," he said. "I'd uh thought you'd uh turned this against me an' taken a peaceful bullet rather than face the torment of a restless ghost."

Zeke snorted. "Except for Granny," he said, "I'd have done it. Hoss. Without ary doubt about the outcome. You're fast, they say, but I'm faster. As fer ghosts, I don't believe in 'em. That feller right there done that screechin' an' moanin'."

"Why, Zeke?" Hoss turned his eyes to the prone man. "Who is he to take up Sam Pete's aces an' eights?"

The renegade shook his towsy head. "Dunno. Reckon that's somethin' we ought to know, eh?" He got up and stretched "I'll go see . . . *sh-h-h-h.*"

Granny was waking. Zeke sat down. The old woman opened her eyes, smiled at Hoss. "I was lookin' through the Pearly Gates, Doctor," she whispered. "Seen a hull passel of my ol' friends. Made me plumb anxious. Zeke, boy." Her withered hand fluttered and Zeke clasped it in his big, calloused palm.

"Yes, Granny."

"I'm glad yo're a clean, Christian man, Zeke. Don't neglect yore church-goin' an' charity-givin'." Her eyes shifted to Hoss. "Sorta look after him, Doctor, after I'm gone. Zeke's a good boy, but a trifle wild an' sorta itchy in the feet. He needs a strong guidin' hand. Promise me you'll—"

"I'll look after him," Hoss muttered, grimly. "Don't you worry, Granny."

The old woman smiled again, sighed and something went out of her. The white-crowned head lolled and a last long breath guttered out. Granny was dead. Another pioneer had passed. "She's dead," Hoss said in a tight, unnatural voice.

Zeke didn't answer. His hands were over his face and tears trickled through his fingers and his heavy body shook with silent sobs. Hoss let him cry and as he watched the killer's grief, he heard a sound. Turning, he saw the masked man sitting up, staring at him, rubbing the knot on his skull. His lips moved and he said, "Well, I'm damned. At best, Hoss, the renewal of broken relations is a nervous matter." He tore away his mask and there sat Arizona's poet laureate: Tommy Givens.

Hoss exclaimed aloud. "Tommy! For God's sake, how'd you get here?"

Tommy grinned. "When I found you gone, friend, I felt abandoned, hopeless. Then I strapped on a gun, our symbol of power. Power is poison. It's effect on a man is tragic. First it stirs an insane excitement, then something worse. No mortal mind can bear the strain of seizing unlimited power, without habit or full knowledge of it, knowing it will be disputed by hungry wolves intent on snatching the carrion. Henry Brooks Adams said that and I find him right. Friends think alike, Hoss, and we find ourselves here, you with a killer weeping at your feet, me with a bump on my head and an unsated impulse in my heart. Where is my gun? Let me have it and I will end his career. His grief is as nothing to my own."

Hoss smiled at the long oratorical effort. "You are the ghost, Tommy?"

Pride glowed in the poet's eyes, pride that he had a quotation for every emergency. "The ghost of forgotten actions came floating before his sight, and things he thought were dead things were alive with a terrible might. The ghost am I of a man who will not die until. . . ." His eyes went venomously to the weeping killer.

Hoss said, "Time enough for our mutual friend, Tommy. Right now you an' me, we're in a tight if Zeke's men recover from their fright and come back at us. Here's your gun, and don't try to use it on him or you'll get worse than a pistol-whipping. Go outside and stand guard."

Givens got up shakily, and accepted the piece. "A moment yet the actor stops and looks around to say farewell. It is an irksome word and task; and when he's laughed and said his say, he shows as he removes the mask a face that's anything but gay."

He turned about and went out the front and Zeke, blowing his nose on the floor, glared after him. "That—that shrimp?" he choked. "He come here huntin' me? Why, I'll wring his neck like I would a—"

"Yore neck-wringin' days is over, Zeke. Right now, it's grave-diggin'. Got a shovel?"

"A wore-out spade with a busted handle.

I'll get it." He walked out into another room and Hoss's eyes fired as he heard the man coming back. But Zeke came peaceably, bearing the poor tool, and Hoss's hunger ebbed. The killer's face twisted with embarrassed emotion as he held up a blanket. "I'd admire to tie Granny up in this, Greer. Can't somehow bear to think of the cold earth touchin' her face."

"To bad," Hoss said tartly, "you didn't think about that when you shot poor Sam Pete. Tie her up, then I'll help you tote her outside."

Zeke whimpered as, on his knees, he wrapped the mortal remains of his grandmother in the banket, lashing the makeshift shroud with a length of light rope. Now it was done and he rose. "All right, Greer."

They picked up the pitifully light burden, moved toward the door, Zeke backing. And it was then that Tommy Givens called sharply from outside. "The timid grow bold, Hoss, and return for the master's scolding. Though I be wrong, I'll welcome them to the home fire. . . ." The snarling *crack* of his six-shooter put a period to his words. It was echoed by a cry of pain and a torrent of startled curses. The confused beat of prancing ponies' hoofs. A resounding rataplan of pistol shots, with bullets thudding into the old station house.

Hoss lowered his end of the burden, bellowing, "Get in here, Tommy. Take cover!"

And Tommy's answer: "Oh shame! where is thy blush? Rebellious hell, if thou canst mutiny in a matron's bones, to flaming youth let virtue be as wax." And his gun was spitting as he quoted it.

GRIMLY, Hoss strode to the mantel piece for Zeke's gun. Across the interval, he looked at the killer, who had lowered the flesh of his kin. "How do you feel about those coyotes, Zeke?"

Dull rage smouldered in the outlaw's eyes. "They let me down," he grumbled. "They run out on me, scairt uh shadders. To hell with 'em! They belong underground. Of the hull passel, the' ain't but one that's got the guts of a flea, an' he's figgerin' to move in ahead uh me. That's Scripture Simkins. Go get 'em, Greer."

"We'll both get 'em, Zeke." Hoss tossed the rolled belt and Zeke caught it, snapped it around his waist and buckled it on. "Understand, Zeke, I don't trust yuh, not any. If the play comes right, you can win yore way outa this yet." He didn't mean that it was his hope that the killer could, standing against his lawless band, expiate his crimes and get right with the law. And Zeke knew he didn't mean it that way. He grunted and together, shoulder to shoulder, they strode out of Halfway House and into battle.

The outlaws were disproving Zeke's appraisal of them. The cry of a ghost had boogered them, but the snarl of guns seemed to hold no terrors for them. It seemed to Hoss, as he went into action, that a dozen men rose like demons from the earth, each shadowy shape shooting. All were afoot now, barging out of the timber, filling the night with the red-painted pennons of gunfire.

Tommy Givens, having paused to reload, was stepping to meet them, moving with short, jerky strides, quoting the masters as he fired, the words blasted apart by the hellish din of gunplay. Happy, drunken warrior. The spectacle he made warmed Hoss's heart. It is not hard to drum up a desperate courage in the heat of conflict. But, in a larger sense, Tommy Givens displayed a finer brand of courage. Beset by heavy odds, facing death, he was scorning a vainly-beckoning avenue of safety for the sake of an ideal.

On Hoss's left, keeping pace, Zeke Zachert pumped stiffly forward, his gun spitting from his hip. And from his lips tumbled a profane defi. "Where are you, Scripture? You want to lead this business, you chicken-livered son of a dog? All right, here's your chance. Knock me over and take the marbles."

A bullet hit him, spun him around. Lead was plucking at Hoss's coat and a slug burned along the inside of his right knee, letting him down. And as he knelt there, never slackening his fire, he was thinking about Scripture Simkins. Hoss had felt the hand of that unholy man before, when leading his lawless followers against the foothill spreads, from Tres Alamos to the Bradshaws. That was before the cowboy posse, led by Hoss Greer, cornered them and shot them to carrion, in the Horseshoe Bend of the Verde. Only Scripture and two of his men got out of that, all bullet-

marked. They hadn't missed death by very much.

Scripture, who boasted he had trained for the ministry and even preached a while, had long since lost all godliness. But his ruthlessness and gun magic had grown with the years. Hoss could hear his high, squeaky voice now, exhorting the outlaws to make an end to the pretensions of the jailbird who drove them for his personal gain. He could not have known Hoss stood with Zeke. Maybe that wouldn't have made any difference. *Quien sabe?* Certainly he could by now see that two men sided his chieftain.

But now there was but one. Hoss, leveling his gun over his forearm at the six-feet-six-inch frame of buzzard-like Scripture, saw Tommy Givens reel and fall. Hoss jerked the trigger at the same instant, heard the great raging cry of Simkins as he hit the earth.

His vision beset by waves of red anger, Hoss stuffed shells into his hot gun, hurled himself up and and toward that weakening line. Previously, Hoss had dropped two that he knew of, Scripture and another. He had seen Tommy Givens knock one over. Zeke he wasn't sure about. The renegade could be trying, or he could be wasting lead. But after seeing Tommy fall, Hoss didn't care. He wasn't sparing himself. He'd go through with this to the smoky, bloody finish.

His charge, bawling like a man berserk, was an inhuman thing. Straight into their blazing muzzles he went, staggering on his game leg. Slugs tapped him, more than several, but none solidly enough to halt him. The draw unimportant now, he was throwing his gun in the old-fashioned way. He was closer now and he could see them, as they took his lead and died. Three more he killed before his gun was empty and as many more he singed. The twelve were reduced to five or six now and the voice of the man they were supporting for leadership was stilled. They broke and ran, and before Hoss could reload they were a-horse and roaring away, spurring and quirting.

Hoss turned, surprised and non-plussed that Zeke had made no play at him. The outlaw's head was bent down and his fingers worked at filling his emptied cylinder. The man was surely a strange mixture of personalities.

HOSS' glance strayed to the huddled form of Tommy Givens. He had looked at death many, many times, and he knew he was looking at it now. Obsessed by the same gnawing regret and grief he always felt in the passing of an old crony, he moved slowly to the poet's side, knelt, felt in vain for a pulse beat. But the error was his. Tommy suddenly stirred, moaned and opened his eyes. A faint smile touched his lips at sight of his friend and he murmured, "They. . . they got me, pardner. Got me for keeps this time."

"Sure, what did you expect?" Hoss rasped. "You reckless damn runt; I told you to come inside."

"You don't understand, Hoss. I wouldn't have had it no other way. It's the only thing in my life that justifies my friendship with men like you an' Sam Pete."

"Hogwash." Hoss tried to mask his feelings in gruffness. "Where you hit? I'll get you tied up an' then we'll light out for Doc Foster."

Givens shook his head. "No chance,

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Hoss. I wouldn't get two miles. You are in on my death, Hoss, and I'm proud it's so. My only regret is that death breaks the sweet bonds that have tempered the hell of this life."

"You damned little fool," Hoss rasped, fighting to keep the sob from his voice. "For cripes' sake, why'd you have to be so crazy bold?"

"Friend." Tommy took Hoss's hand. "'Tis writ on your door, that saying wise and old. Be bold! Be bold! Everywhere be bold. But, friend, be not too bold. Take warning from one who loves you like a brother. And if you ever moved fast, Hoss, move now. Zeke—"

Hoss did not let him finish. He hurled himself aside and down, rolling. He heard the snarl of Zeke's gun, the smack of the bullet as it struck Tommy Givens. Hoss came to his knees, knelt there for a clock-tick like a graven image. His eyes burned across the interval, where Zeke was shifting for another shot. There was something terrible in that glare, something that halted the killer's second shot, something that drained the last of the man's bravado. His gun was deliberately lifting and Zeke cried, "No, Hoss!" In the protest was the terror of desperation. It loosed his pistol fire, but Hoss fired a split second before the outlaw.

Zeke's bullet struck the ground before Hoss, burning his leg as it ricocheted, showering him with gravel. Zeke made no sound. He straightened, took two aimless steps and plunged to earth. Hoss replaced the spent cartridge, anger a fever in his veins. When he rose, his face was drawn and old. "Whee-ew," he sighed. "Was I some scairt? Scairt when he begged that he was skunkin' on me."

He went to Tommy, found him dead, spent a moment in silent tribute to a fallen valiant. Then he got up and went for Zeke's broken spade.

* * *

That night, nearly a week later, when Hoss faced the commissioners in Juniperville and turned in his badge, his report was characteristic of his wonted taciturnity. "Gentlemen, you will not be bothered with Zeke Zachert any further. Where he's gone, I just can't foller him. He's down in hell!"

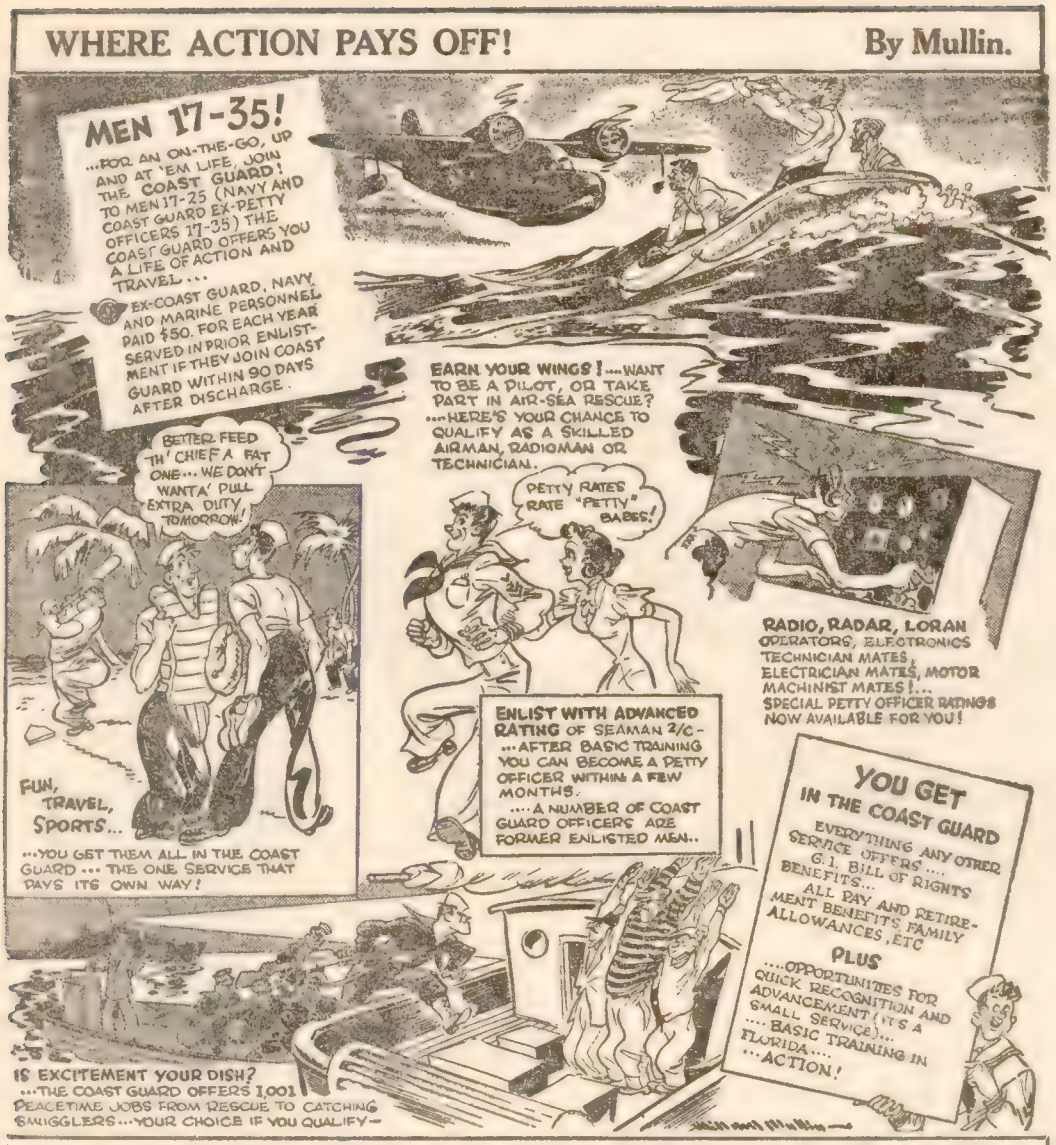
His friends took this to mean that Hoss had killed the badman, though even they could not credit him with killing the whole gang. His traducers seized upon the affair, declaring Hoss had made some sort of a deal with Zeke. Only that could explain the outlaw's disappearance, along with his wide loop organization. A confusing point to both factions was Tommy Givens' disappearance. Did that bear upon the Zachert business or was it coincidence? What in hell was the answer?

The years passed. The mystery of Zeke and dreamy-eyed Tommy Givens became a maze of legends. What had happened out there, along some skyline trail? Was Zeke in South America, with his unholy crew, as some claimed? And what of gentle Thomas Barclay Givens, whose poetic wisdom was still missed in Juniperville saloons, and in the legislative halls, down Phoenix way. In all his tempestuous life, Hoss told only one man and here, for the first and only time, it is set forth to be read by those who will.

Rain and wind and the hand of Time have leveled out the graves and reduced Halfway House to a pile of rubble and rotting timbers. Hoofmarks of wild cattle and pads of wilder night slinkers have erased the man tracks along the Old Reno Trail. Those who trod its dust are gone, mostly forgotten. Their deeds recorded in musty lawman files or in age yellowed military journals. But sometimes, around rangeland campfires, grizzled cowmen speak of Old Hoss Greer and of Zeke Zachert and his twenty notches. Speculation flourishes, and argument too. No two agree. But lately there is a growing conviction among Arizona pioneers that Tommy Givens got to Zeke first, killed him and died to avenge a friend. That, they state, is the only reason Hoss won't talk: a poet beat him to the shot.

That legend gains strength with the years, has in fact been written into one historical work. It is uncannily close to the truth and from the first has pleased Hoss. When asked to verify it, he only pulls his chin, smiles and speculates on the weather. And, as Tommy Givens would have put it: "The imposter imposes silence where he cannot convince. In silence there is no weakness, no regret."

THE END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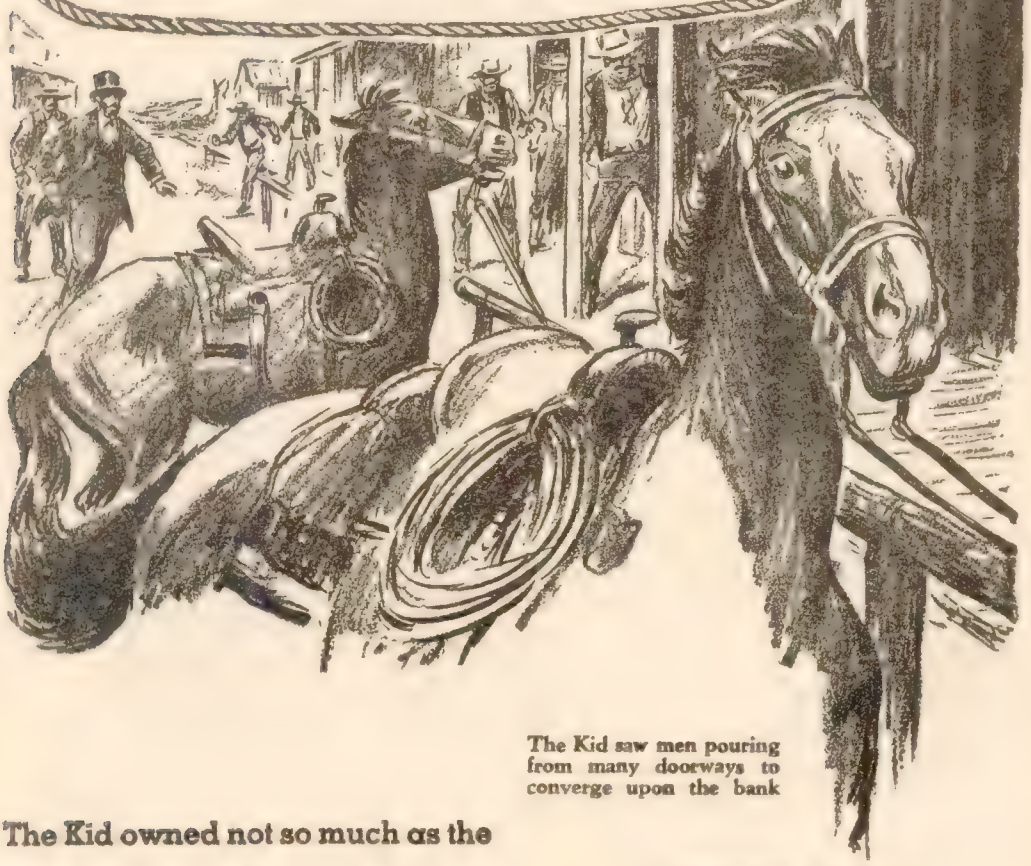
# THAT DARK-TRAIL DON QUIXOTE!

## By Norman A. Fox



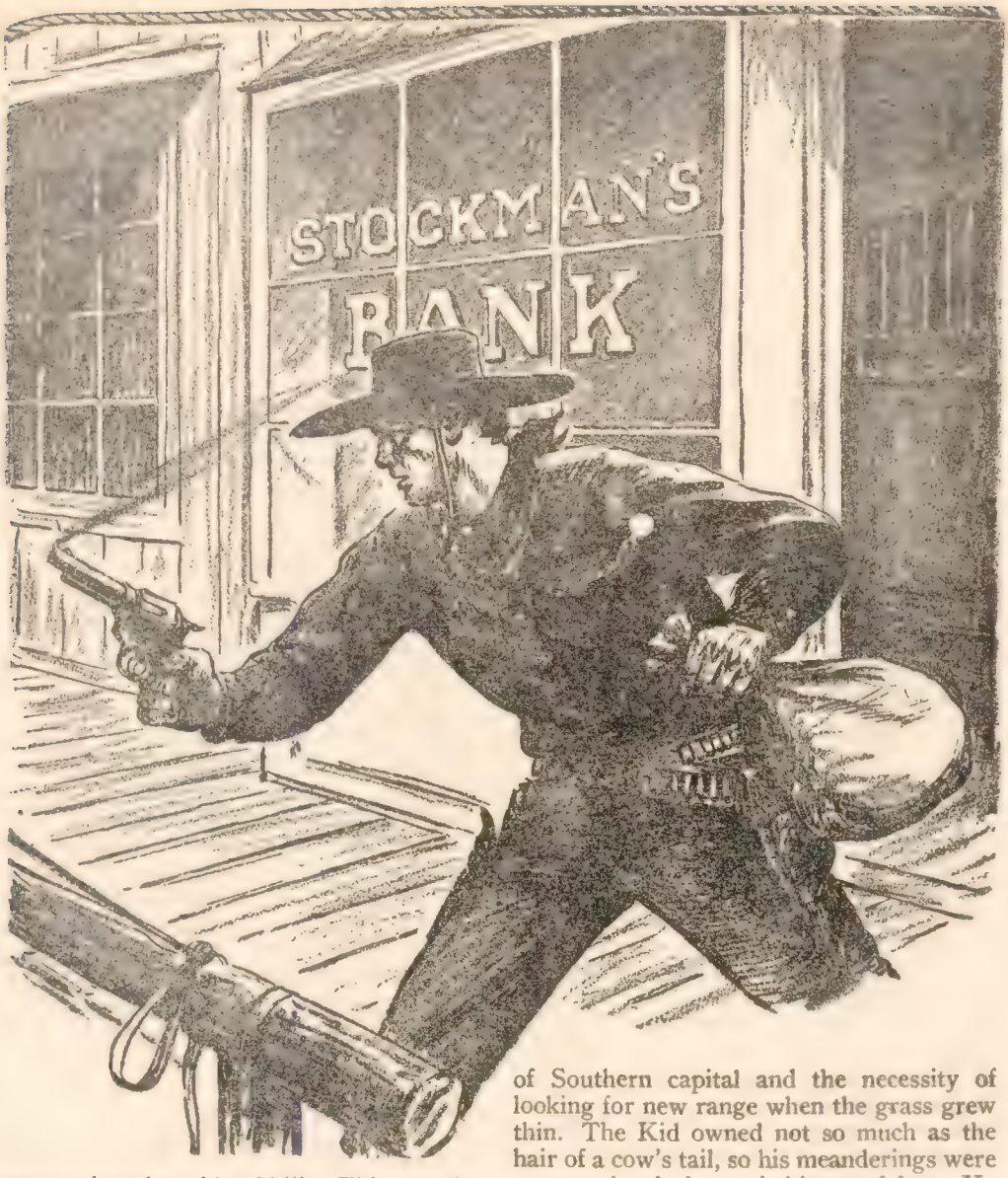
The Kid saw men pouring from many doorways to converge upon the bank

**The Kid owned not so much as the hair of a cow's tail, but he did pack a bellyful of guts. He needed all of them—and a heap more besides—when he met the deadly stranger who favored black duds, black guns and deep, dark graves. . . .**

### CHAPTER ONE

#### Flight by Night

THEY called him the Manana Kid because he was a great believer in putting off until tomorrow the things that should be done today. He had procrastinated himself from the brimstone border to Montana's snow-crested ranges by the simple expedient of following the lines of least resistance. He came toward Conestoga only because the town lay beyond the far slope of Big Baldy, and the Kid was quite a fellow for seeing what




was on the other side of hills. This was the Kid's nearest approach to ambition, but he didn't work hard at it. If half of a hill trail was up, and therefore required the effort of climbing, the other half was down and made easy riding. *'Sta bueno.* There was a just balance in all things.

Not that he was Mexican, except in philosophy. His was the blue-eyed breed that had peopled Tennessee, transplanted its seed to Texas, and then been scattered to the four winds by certain economic disturbances involving the longhorn, a dearth of Southern capital and the necessity of looking for new range when the grass grew thin. The Kid owned not so much as the hair of a cow's tail, so his meanderings were prompted only by an itchiness of foot. He had a summer's pay in his pants, and it was high time to be moving again.

Hard riding might have fetched him into Conestoga that very night—he had a vague notion of the town's whereabouts and the distance yet to be covered—but hard riding only got a man saddle sores, and tomorrow was another day. Accordingly, he made his solitary camp in the foothills that kow-towed to Big Baldy, set bacon in a frying pan and got a coffee pot to bubbling, and afterward he reclined on his saddle blanket

and shaped himself up a cigarette. He'd drawn in three good puffs when a man came easing out of the night and the brush and into the dying firelight's circle. This man said, "Howdy," very carefully.

"Howdy," said the Kid. "Light and set."

A fine-dressed jigger, this stranger out of the night. Favored black. Wore it from head to foot, and even the handles of his two thonged six-shooters were of that same somber color. In height the stranger probably matched the Kid's own six feet one, and in weight he'd have tallied close to the Kid's one hundred and eighty pounds. The face was as somber as the garb, a long face with a hooked nose that looked like it might have been busted once. The stranger sat down as carefully as though he had eggs in his pockets.

"New to these parts?" he asked.

The Kid nodded. "From up Milk River way," he said. "Heading south with the birds."

"Poker?" Hook-Nose suggested and produced a deck of cards.

Now when a man has pay in his pants, he can keep from working just as long as that pay lasts. Double the pay and you've doubled that happy period when you can roundside in the sun. Lose the pay and you go riding the grubline or looking for work. It was a gamble. So was most of living. "Deal 'em," said the Kid and reached for his summer's wages.

Hook-Nose too placed money on the blanket—nice, new crisp money—and the cards fell, and the money crossed the blanket this way and that, but before the fire had been replenished three times, the Kid was richer than he'd been since he'd shaken the dust of Texas. He could say this for Hook-Nose, the man was a good loser, even though he did take to scowling a little as the cards kept going against him. Somewhere between moonrise and midnight, Hook-Nose said, "That cleans me," and threw down his cards with a great disgust.

The Kid was counting the money—the nice, new, crisp money—and translating it into the number of days of ease it represented. It made him feel fine and warm and charitable. "Got anything else you could ante?" he asked. "Those black-handled guns, for instance? I'd just as soon keep the game going."

Hook-Nose's scowl grew blacker. "With my luck running the way it is?" he snorted. Then he spent a moment apparently talking it over with himself. "Tell you what," he said. "Let's play one more hand. My duds, every stitch I'm wearing, against yours, with you putting up some cash to boot to make it a fair shake. If I win, I'm in the game again."

Now the Kid's clothes were threadbare and weak at the seams; his sombrero had got kicked around a breaking corral until the shape was gone out of it, and his boots were so thin he could call heads or tails on a dime by stepping on it. He looked over that fancy black garb of Hook-Nose's and he shelled out one hundred dollars of his winnings for boot and laid the money on the blanket. "It's a deal," he said.

Hook-Nose should have called it quits when he went broke. He did the dealing, but a full house beats two of a kind in any man's poker game.

"Damn!" said Hook-Nose and began to skin out of his clothes.

THE Kid kicked some life into the fire; it was cold at this altitude at this season. He too began to peel, handing his clothes across to Hook-Nose as he discarded them, and he took Hook-Nose's clothes in turn, and each of them got a fairly good fit out of the deal. Hook-Nose even passed over the two black-butted guns, and the Kid gave him his own worn Colt. The Kid was going to say a word about that, but Hook-Nose, buckling the Kid's belt about his lean middle, suddenly stiffened, his face alert, his head inclined.

"Do you hear horses moving in the brush?" he demanded.

The Kid strained his ears. The night had plenty of noises and, away off yonder, a coyote poured out its loneliness to the sullen moon. The Kid wasn't sure about any horses. But Hook-Nose said nervously, "I'll be getting along!" and vanished into the night and the brush as quietly and as quickly as he'd come. A few moments later the Kid heard the creak of saddle leather, the movement of a horse along a timbered trail. That would be Hook-Nose making his departure. The man had had his horse staked out somewhere yonder, leaving the mount behind when he'd approached the Kid's fire. The Kid shrugged. A great fellow for doing everything in a hurry, that

Hook-Nose. Hurrying made a man old before his time.

Then the Kid himself was moving with far more than his usual alacrity. That was because of the bullet. It sang a mournful song painfully close to his ear and went whining on into the night, and the Kid, all instinct now, grabbed at the coffee pot and upended it, pouring what was left of the coffee into the fire. Smoke billowed upward, nearly choking him, but the light was gone, and in the darkness he made fast tracks, for fully a dozen guns were now targeted upon this spot. He didn't bother with the coffee pot and frying pan; he snatched up his saddle and blanket and other gear and faded back into the timber to where he'd staked out his own horse, and he got gear onto the mount as fast as any man could whose fingers had turned wooden with excitement.

Up into saddle, he peered about, cursing the thickness of the night and the thickness of the timber. The moon teetered atop Big Baldy and there wasn't light enough filtering down through the tree tops to show a man his hand in front of his face. He could hear horses crashing frantically through the brush, making no effort at silence, and when he tried to orient these sounds, he awoke to the realization that he was being systematically surrounded. This was no time for a man to let himself be stampeded, so he only urged his mount to a walk and held it at this pace, letting the horse pick its own trail while the Kid rode with his right arm crooked before his face to keep himself from being slapped by low-hanging branches.

It was slow going, and the Kid remembered the treeless Texas plains with longing and wondered what fool had planted all this timber in these foothills and why the jackass had been so inconsiderate as to plant the trees so close together. Within a half-hour he was afoot and leading the mount, and shortly thereafter he staked out the horse, leaving saddle and bridle in place, and lit out for himself. The guns had long since gone silent, but he could still hear horses moving about and it occurred to him that he likewise could be heard. He found a game trail after stumbling over at least a dozen deadfall logs, and he was following this trail when he heard the *clip-clop* of hoofs so close that he barely had time to get himself to cover. However, he managed it.

Two riders were coming along the trail. They paused, sitting their saddles, and one, the bigger one, made some vague movement with his arms, and shortly a match flared and was touched to a cigarette, the light briefly revealing a broad, bony face with a down-sweeping mustache under a ponderous nose. The other rider said, "Dad! Was that a very wise thing to do?" It was a girl's voice.

He'd got a quick glimpse of her face, too, in the light of the match her father had struck, and it was a mighty pretty face, heart-shaped and easy on the eyes. The man said, "What's the difference, Linda? If I'd drawn a bullet, I'd at least have known where that sneaking Rance Devereaux is hiding. To think that we had him lined up in his own camp-fire and let him slip through our fingers! Just because some fool was too itchy-fingered to hold his fire another minute!"

The girl chuckled. "At least we made him jump."

"Did you get much of a look at him?" her father asked.

"Enough to recognize those black duds of his."

"Still think he's the man you saw in Alder?"

"It was pretty dark that night too, Dad. And all I saw of him was when he came around the corner of the alley from behind the bank. Too bad he didn't run into the sheriff instead of the sheriff's daughter that night. But he seems to be shot with luck."

"And we're shot with bad luck," her father growled. "This is like looking for a needle in a haystack. Might as well collect the posse and find a place where we can spread our blankets till dawn. I'd hoped we'd bed in Conestoga tonight. We can't be far from the danged town. But now we'll likely never see the place. It stands to reason Devereaux won't show himself there with us so hard on his heels."

The man jogged his horse and rode onward, the girl trailing after him, and the Kid stayed in the brush and counted to one hundred slowly. He began working back toward his horse then, and, in the distance, he could now hear a great deal of hallooing as the sheriff of Alder gathered his scattered posse. The sound gradually dimin-

ished, and soon the Kid was into saddle again. Sighing, he tried picking his way back toward his camp.

Actually, it might be said that the camp found him rather than the other way around, for it was at dawn that his horse almost stepped on the coffee pot whereas the Kid would have sworn by then that he was heading in the wrong direction and was somewhere on the far shoulder of Big Baldy. Weary and disgusted and cursing the luck that had kept him drifting aimlessly when he might have been enjoying a good night's sleep, he lighted down from the saddle. Picking up the coffee pot and the frying pan, he restored these to his saddle bag, too tired to make himself breakfast and too wary to want to risk a fire with that posse still somewhere around. Rance Devereaux's deck of cards were scattered about, and the Kid began listlessly picking these up, and when he'd collected them all, he began as listlessly to lay out a game of solitaire.

The game went well—too well, for he turned up the aces fast. Seven of them. That didn't make a lick of sense, no matter how you looked at it. He'd already begun to suspect that Rance Devereaux hardly qualified as a paragon of honesty, but here was a question for a man to ponder: If Devereaux played poker with a crooked deck, then why hadn't Devereaux won instead of lost?

There was a hole in the coffee pot, the Kid recalled, a bullet hole which was fortunately too high to have completely spoiled the pot's usefulness. Bullets . . . posses . . . crooked cards . . . ? They might all add up to a sensible answer if a man thought hard enough about it. But the Kid was too tired for thinking. Manana was another day. He'd do his thinking then.

## CHAPTER TWO

### In a Badman's Boots

CONESTOGA stood out upon the prairie like a wart on a fat man's forehead, a straggly collection of false-fronts so rickety in appearance that the Kid judged a good huff and a puff would blow the whole burg over. A fine town, this one! Every other building seemed to be a saloon, and the dogs outnumbered the men among the populace by a ratio of three to one. But it was a jaundiced eye that the Kid turned upon Conestoga that late afternoon. He'd tried catching up on his sleep through the heat of the day, and all of the winged and crawling denizens of the foothills had immediately decided to hold a picnic upon his prone form. The Seven Golden Cities of Cibola would have looked like so many anthills to the Kid.

Still, his luck hadn't all been sour. In the pockets of the black clothing Mr. Rance Devereaux had so craftily bestowed upon him there'd been a few coins, a jackknife, and a map. That map had shown the surrounding country—Big Baldy, the foothills, another range of hills to the south, and the town itself. Diligent study of this map had enabled the Kid to get out of the hills and upon the prairie's flatness without riding around in circles and meeting himself coming. The map was some compensation for his difficulties of the night before. *'Sta bueno.* There was a just balance in all things.

And Conestoga itself was sanctuary. No two ways about that. Hadn't the sheriff from Alder mentioned that likely he and his posse would never see the town since Rance Devereaux would be too prudent to show his face there with a posse at his heels? The Kid was too tired to want to spend another night dodging bullets. Therefore the Kid was coming to Conestoga, not because it had originally lain in his trail, but because Conestoga was the one place where he could get a night's rest without combing lead out of his hair.

Confound that Rance Devereaux for roiling up the easy-flowing stream of a man's life!

Devereaux had wanted to switch identities, of course. That was now painfully clear to the Kid, and he could applaud the careful method Devereaux had used to bring about the switching of clothes so that the Kid now wore Devereaux's distinctive garb. A proposed swap would have been ridiculous, arousing the Kid's suspicion. So the hook-nosed man had done business with a crooked deck of cards, and the Kid had then become Devereaux in the minds of certain trigger-happy possemen from up Alder way. No telling what complications could come from parading around the country dressed like Rance Devereaux;

even Conestoga might look upon him suspiciously. But the danger in Conestoga was problematical; the danger in the hills was real. The Kid had only to look at his coffee pot to remember. At the first opportunity he'd shuck these damning clothes.

Into Conestoga he rode as warily as a sleepy-eyed man might, and he stepped down from his saddle before a hitchrail with the feeling of one who is not quite sure of his welcome. He was before a saloon—the way the law of averages worked in Conestoga, you were always before a saloon—and there were a few loungers beneath the wooden awning that fronted the place. These loungers were strangely silent—ominously silent, the Kid judged—and he was already wondering if he'd played so smart in coming here. Then a man detached himself from the supporting post against which he leaned, moved forward and said, "Howdy. Us boys just figgered out that you're Rance Devereaux. You'll want your hoss stabled and grained. I'll take care of it."

And you could run the Kid through all the cactus in Texas with his chaps off if the man didn't lead the horse away just like he was being paid to do the job!

The Kid was no man to question miracles. He climbed the steps and sauntered into the saloon, and instantly got the impression that some of the loungers had preceded him and spread the news of his coming. The silence was so thick you could cut it with a knife. There was a bar, and a sawdust-strewn floor, and a scattering of gaming tables; the place was like all the saloons the Kid had ever seen, but there was no talk, no bantering, not even the friendly clinking of glasses. The men at the bar stood stolidly; the men at the tables sat like so many statues. It was plumb depressing.

The Kid jangled his spurs to the bar and said, "Whiskey."

"Of course, Mr. Devereaux," the barkeep said. He was a fat, bald man with a rind of sweat on his upper lip. "Just a moment till I open the boss's private bottle. You'll want to be served at a table, I reckon. I'll fetch the drink right away!"

THE Kid would have preferred to stand. Shrugging, he seated himself at the table, and shortly a bottle was placed before him and a glass was filled, and when he downed the drink he decided there was a lot he hadn't known about whiskey up until now. Here was bottled happiness, for sure. Two more drinks and the Kid was contemplating putting on a square dance all by himself. Too bad they didn't have music in this place.

He was surprised to discover that he'd said it aloud.

"We'll borrow a piano from the Tivoli, across the street," the barkeep said apologetically. "If you'll wait just a moment, Mr. Devereaux, I'll have some of the boys lug it over here."

"Never mind," said the Kid. "It was just what you might call a fleeting fancy of mine."

Confound it, why did they all have to sit staring at him as if he were a two-headed man? Was it so quiet in here that they could actually hear his thoughts? He wished somebody would drop a playing card on the floor just to make a little noise!

The batwings creaked and a man came sauntering in—a small, frock-coated man with a pointed beak just like a bird's, and the same fluttery ways. Strew some crumbs on the floor, the Kid decided, and yonder man would start hopping about, picking them up. The fellow was on the shady side of fifty and had the look of a one-drink-a-day man, the kind who finds it politic to make an occasional appearance among his fellow men just to prove himself of ordinary clay. This man approached the bar and said, with a great clearing of his throat, "The usual, Bates."

The apron uncorked a bottle of beer. "Here you are, Mr. Wood. A busy day at the bank?"

"So-so," said the bird-like Mr. Wood. He put his back to the bar, holding the beer in his hand, and gave a friendly nod to the silent men, his eyes lighting last on the Manana Kid. He crossed to the Kid's table and thrust out his hand. "You're Mr. Devereaux, of course," he said. "The whole town's buzzing with talk of your arrival. We've heard of you Mr. Devereaux. Oh, yes, indeed! I'm Jared Wood, president of the Stockmen's Bank here."

The whiskey had restored the Kid's usual amiability, though it had made him even sleepier. He took Jared Wood's limp hand

and felt a small card being pressed against his palm. Whereupon Wood returned to the bar and shortly thereafter finished his beer, nodded all around and betook himself out of the place.

Curiosity, that killer of cats, rode the Kid hard. He pined mightily to see what was written on that card, but the secretive way that it had been presented to him suggested a secretive examination. Shoving back the bottle, he crossed to the bar and began fishing for some of that crisp, new money he'd won from Rance Devereaux. But the barkeep said, "It's on the house, Mr. Devereaux."

"So—?" said the Kid and went out to the boardwalk. He had a look at the card then, and written in a cramped, precise fist were the words: "My cottage is the last one at the west end of the street. Come to the back door as soon as it is dark."

It was nearly dark now. And the same curiosity that had prompted the Kid to want to know what had been written on the card was now needling him to go and find out just what it was that Jared Wood wanted to see him about. There was enough time to eat supper and then keep the rendezvous, and the Kid let his nose direct him to a restaurant. He had steak and spuds and apple pie and coffee, and the whole thing was on the house. A mighty charitable town, this Conestoga. The Kid was just deciding that he liked it here, he liked it very much, thank you, when he stepped out of the restaurant and ran smack dab into the girl.

You couldn't mistake that heart-shaped face, even if you'd only seen it once, briefly, in the flare of a match. It was that kind of face. It stayed with you. He saw now that she was wearing a divided riding skirt and boots and all the trimmings, and he saw that she was exceedingly angry. She planted herself in front of him like it was going to take a keg of powder to dislodge her, and she said scornfully, "So you're the famous badman, Rance Devereaux!"

He opened his mouth to tell her she was mistaken, but she didn't give him a chance. "We've met before," she said. "Or have you forgotten? That night, a week ago, when you broke into the bank at Alder and almost knocked me down as you came running out of the alley with a towsack loaded with loot. You may have scared this town witless, but you don't scare me! And you won't scare my father, either. Dave Bradstreet is a different breed of sheriff than the fat clown they have here who rode out as soon as he heard you were around."

The Kid managed to say, "I'd like a few words with your father, miss."

"And you'll get that chance, I hope," she said. "Dad didn't want me to come from Alder with the posse, but I trailed along until they were climbing Big Baldy, then showed myself. He couldn't send me back then. But he made me come here today and promise to stay and wait while he combed the foothills. Your sign will lead him straight here before long. And you'll talk to him then. With a pair of handcuffs on you!"

She stormed past him like a small hurricane, banging the screen door of the restaurant as she barged inside. For a moment the Kid was tempted to follow her, to try and explain how matters really stood, but he had a hunch he'd better wait until her anger cooled a little before he tried it. But, confound it, he didn't like being pegged as a bank robber in her mind! He was going to have to straighten that little matter out—and pronto. But how? He'd have given all that crisp, new money of Devereaux's to have his hand on the man's collar at this very moment. It looked like the only way he could really clear himself would be to get hold of Devereaux and shake the truth out of him.

BUT first there was that business of the rendezvous with Jared Wood, the banker. The Kid was still curious about that, and he headed to the west end of the street and found the last cottage, a mighty nice little cottage, painted white. He knocked at the back door and Wood appeared. "Come in. Come in," the banker urged. He had skinned out of his frock coat and looked less like a bird now, for some reason. More like a weasel, the Kid decided.

Leading the way to an ornate living room, Wood carefully inspected the window shades which were already drawn. Gesturing the Kid to a chair, the banker said, "You got my letter, of course. That's why you're here. I had to be careful what I put in a letter; too much chance of it falling into the wrong hands. But am I correct in

my presumption that you, er, rob a bank from time to time?" He raised his hands in a quick gesture. "This is strictly between us, of course. I know that the law hasn't a thing on you as yet."

"I turn a dollar any way I can," the Kid admitted.

"Fine. Fine." Wood rubbed his hands together until the Kid wondered if the skin might come off. "You're laying your cards out for my inspection; I'll do likewise. Then we'll feel safe in trusting each other. There's a deficit of at least twenty thousand dollars in my bank's cash as compared to what the books show we should have on hand. I don't mind admitting that the cash is in a valise in yonder bedroom, ready for the day when I'll head out of here. But there must be some way of accounting for the shortage if the depositors ever become suspicious and demand an audit of the books."

"That," said the Kid, "is too deep for me."

"You'll understand shortly. We'll stage the holdup soon. Tomorrow at high noon would be a good time. Most folks are at their dinner and there isn't likely to be many in the bank or on the street. The sheriff decided he had rustler sign to cut in the hills five minutes after he heard you were in town. He's an honest fool though, even if he hadn't the nerve to want to hang around with a man of your reputation visiting us. Shortly he'll feel that he'll have to come back to save face. The sooner, then, that we get this over with, the better. Just throw a gun in my face tomorrow and order me to empty the vault. The loot I'll hand you will be an even ten thousand dollars, just as I hinted in my letter. But afterwards I'll give out the word that you got thirty thousand. You see how it'll work?"

"An easy robbery for me," said the Kid. "A deficit covered for you."

"Exactly! You have the map?"

"The map—?" The Kid remembered the one he'd found in Devereaux's pocket. "Sure, here it is." And he spread it out.

"I thought it would be safe to send it along with the letter and give you that much more time to study the lay of the land," Wood said. He poked a bony finger at the map. "To the north is open country, and it's not too far to Canada. Everybody will expect you to head in that direction, and any posse that gets formed will take the north trail. See this range of hills to the south? The Wolfjaws, they're called. They're almost impassible, but there's a notch here." The bony finger jabbed hard. "A place called Tomahawk Pass. And once through that pass, you'll be in the clear while posses are running around in circles to the north."

"Good," said the Kid.

"Very well, then. Any questions?"

"Yes," said the Kid. "Where can I find a soft bed?"

"The Hillview is the best hotel," Wood said. "You'll have no trouble getting a room once they realize who you are."

And there was no trouble, no trouble whatsoever. The room was on the house. The Kid climbed the stairs, staggered blindly into the room, yawned wide enough to let a herd of cattle pass through, and eyed the furnishings with interest in only one item. The bed. What a lovely thing was a bed!

## CHAPTER THREE

### Amateur Outlaw

SUNLIGHT, streaming through a window, awoke the Kid in mid-morning, but at first he merely lay in the bed, acutely aware that he wanted to stay there but realizing somehow that there was a very important reason why he should get up. The reason escaped him in the blurred confusion of awakening, but when he glanced toward a chair upon which he'd strewn as much of Rance Devereaux's black garb as he'd managed to shuck before falling into bed, he remembered. By gosh, he was supposed to rob the Conestoga bank at high noon.

The Kid yawned noisily. Now why hadn't he arranged with Jared Wood to pull the job at four o'clock, say? A few more hours sleep would be a mighty fine thing.

Getting into Devereaux's clothes, he went down the street to the restaurant where he'd had supper the night before. Breakfast was on the house. The real Rance Devereaux, the Kid reflected, must have quite a rep. The Kid was hoping that he would find Linda Bradstreet in the restaurant, and he was also hoping that a good night's sleep had taken the temper out of her. But the

girl was nowhere about, and when he'd come to the boardwalk again he glanced at the sun, saw that it lacked about an hour of high noon, and headed for the post office.

He spent nearly all of the following hour in the post office, diligently toiling away at writing a letter. He had to guess at the spelling of some of the words, but when he got the letter finished he was rather proud of it, and he hoped the recipient wouldn't consider the many blots as too unseemly. A plague on post office pens! He asked for a stamp at the grilled window and mailed the letter. He had to pay for the stamp. Uncle Sam's grizzled representative in Conestoga was the one man who was unimpressed by the reputation of Rance Devereaux.

Nearly noon, the sun said. Time to be getting about robbing the bank.

It came to the Kid that this was going to be strictly an amateur performance. He had no more notion as to how you went about robbing a bank than a horse would have about how to shoe himself. But the thought of horses suggested his first step. Stood to reason that any bright, up-and-coming bank robber would have his horse handy for a getaway afterwards. Accordingly, the Kid went to the livery stable, had his mount saddled, and led it to the hitchrail before the bank. He tied the horse in such a fashion that a quick jerk at the tie-rope would free the animal. The Kid was learning.

The bank was a frame structure, leaning slightly slantwise as though it had grown tired of shouldering against the perpetual buffeting of the west wind. It had a broad bay window with the name of the institution emblazoned in gold letters. The Kid climbed the steps and strode into a sizeable room with a partition running across the back end and a number of grilled windows set in the partition. Jared Wood had known whereof he spoke when he'd said there'd be few people around at this hour. The bank had no customers at all. Behind one grilled window was a sallow young man with thinning hair; behind another was Jared Wood himself.

The Kid drew one of those black-butted guns which Rance Devereaux had bestowed upon him, tilted the barrel in the general direction of the ceiling, and said, "This is a holdup!"

Jared Wood and the sallow young man hoisted their hands with commendable alacrity, but the real fear was in the young man's face. Obviously he wasn't in on the act. The two standing thus, the Kid had an embarrassing moment. What in blazes was a man supposed to do next? Striding close to Wood's window, the Kid said, "Open the vault, savvy! Open the vault and hand over the money!"

"The sack!" Wood whispered hoarsely. "Didn't you fetch a loot sack?"

The Kid stared blankly. If he was supposed to equip himself, why hadn't Wood said so the night before? But, then, Jared Wood had presumed that he was Rance Devereaux and knew all about such matters. "Never mind," Wood whispered and went puttering about until he found a canvas money sack in which a consignment of currency or minted money had doubtless one time come. He got the vault open and began dumping packets of nice, new, crisp currency into the sack. He worked hurriedly—you couldn't have asked for a more obliging man at the other end of a holdup—and when he'd gotten the sack stuffed, he raised the grill in the window and thrust the sack out at the Kid.

"Thanks," said the Kid, remembering his manners. He cased the black-butted gun, the better to handle the sack; and that was a mighty bad mistake.

He'd forgotten all about that sallow cashier, for the young man had stood rooted, his hands hoisted, his eyes popped out. But the clerk, seeing the Kid case his gun, obviously also saw the shape of an opportunity to make a hero of himself. Instantly those raised hands dropped, disappearing below the level of the grilled window, and when they hoisted again, the young man was grasping a sawed-off single-barreled shotgun. Courage had dictated this play, but fear was in the youth, too, fear that palsied his hands, and that was the Manana Kid's saving. The Kid fell face forward to the floor just as the shotgun blasted, and he would have sworn that he heard the whistling of the buckshot over his head.

That shotgun made a mighty racket, and the echo of it was still thundering in the room when the Kid came erect, clutching the money sack in his left hand now and reaching for a gun again. He blasted three

shots into the ceiling to intimidate the young man, then turned and dashed toward the door. But even though the Kid's skin was whole, a great deal of damage had been done. Gun-thunder inside the bank was already a tocsin to the town. There'd be men swarming this way from every which direction.

YES, the hornets' nest had been kicked over for sure. Even as the Kid hit his saddle, Pony Express style, he saw men pouring from many doorways to converge upon the bank, and he could hear their angry shouts. They were mad plumb through, these men of Conestoga.

And that was to be expected, in spite of the way they had walked wide of the man they presumed to be Rance Devereaux. They had known Devereaux's reputation, and their bowing and scraping had been in the hope of placating him so that he'd make no trouble during his stay in Conestoga. Obviously such tactics had failed, and now these men were aware that their bank had been gutted. The money in the canvas sack was their money—made from deposits earned in toil and sweat. A poet had once said that if you steal a man's purse you steal trash, but that didn't hold true in this town. Conestoga was on the warpath.

But the Kid wasn't much concerned as he jerked at the tie-rope and freed his horse. He was up into saddle, and that made all the advantage because he could show them his heels before they got to horses and organized any systematic pursuit. Then he saw Linda Bradstreet. The girl had just come out of the restaurant; she must have been having her noon meal; and with her had come all the rest of the patrons of the place. The others were making a wild charge toward the bank, but the girl stood rooted at the edge of the boardwalk, her face turned not toward the cause of all this confusion but to the west. And the triumph in her face drew the Kid's glance in that direction.

A fine howdy-you-do! With twenty-four hours in each and every day, Sheriff Dave Bradstreet, that zealous manhunter from Alder, would have to select *this* hour to come leading his weary posse in from a fruitless search of the foothills!

No mistake about it. The cavalcade that came dispiritedly up the street was headed by the same broad-faced man the Kid had glimpsed so briefly in the flare of a match the night before last. And Linda was now running down the street toward her father, running to carry the news that the quarry who'd eluded him in the hills was within reach; and, with that sight to spur him, the Kid wheeled his horse and drove the mount into the slot between the bank building and the mercantile next to it.

He gained the alley and thundered along it, then worked his way toward the town's outskirts and turned his face to where Big Baldy stood starkly against the skyline. He still had a slight advantage; the horses of the posse from Alder were jaded, and Sheriff Dave Bradstreet would doubtless tarry long enough to get his followers up on fresh mounts. The Kid's horse, after nearly a day in the livery stable, was yearning to stretch its legs, and the Kid encouraged this commendable ambition. It was these first few minutes that would count.

And so he went bee-lining for the hills, clutching the canvas sack grimly and pausing to look back now and then. Before he was into the first timber, he saw a plume of dust raised out of Conestoga and knew that many horses were stirring that dust. But now he smiled to himself, aware that he'd gained the necessary margin. He'd be into the timber before they got within six-shooter range of him.

A half-hour later found him deep among the trees, toiling up a slope, leading his mount, and now he'd taken time to fasten the canvas loot sack to the saddle horn and to have a good long look at that map Jared Wood had provided for Rance Devereaux. His destination was Tomahawk Pass, miles to the south, but his job was first to throw the pursuit off his trail before he headed for the pass. He went about this diligently, blessing the thoughtful fellow who'd planted all this timber in the foothills, glad that whoever had done it had been so considerate as to plant the trees so close together. A horse couldn't be glimpsed a dozen yards away!

But Sheriff Dave Bradstreet must have been possessed of a bloodhound's nose. Twice, from high promontories, the Kid glimpsed the posse, and, seeing the size of it and remembering Bradstreet's following as the Alder sheriff had ridden into Cones-

toga, the Kid knew that the posse had been augmented by recruits from Conestoga. Bradstreet was clinging to the trail with a woodtick's own tenacity, and the Kid had to be mighty careful in his maneuvering as he veered steadily southward toward Tomahawk Pass and the open country that would lie beyond it.

The day was dying as he neared his destination, and the Kid had looked many times at the map in his search for the notch leading through the barrier hills. He was taking risks now; he had to find the pass before sundown because by night all trees looked alike and had an odd habit of blocking the way. For the past hour he'd had no glimpse of the posse, heard no sound of horses crashing through underbrush; and he was beginning to breathe easier. Then he found the pass and began toiling up toward its crest, hobbling along on his boots and leading the horse behind him.

Twilight was upon the land as he reached the top; he paused here and had a long look at the graying vista behind him, seeing the distant rooftops of Conestoga, seeing the smoke spiraling upward from many chimneys. Suppertime. The Kid sighed and took the downward slant. No time now to put the frying pan and coffee pot to use.

But his heart was lighter than it had been for hours. He hadn't been so bad as an amateur outlaw. True, he'd been a mite careless to have let that young cashier get his hands on the shotgun, but, all in all, he'd conducted the affair as well as the next man might have, and he'd proved himself a fair hand at covering his tracks afterwards. Where was Sheriff Bradstreet now? Running around in circles back yonder on the slope of Big Baldy, probably.

The Kid sighed. He'd really had to stir himself today. He'd sleep well tonight, the sleep of the weary. So thinking, he came to the last curve in the trail; he rounded an outcropping of rock and glimpsed the open country spreading before him, but the sight that held his eyes was nearer at hand—a man leaning indolently against a boulder, leaning and waiting just like he'd known all along that the Kid would be coming this way. The man had a gun in his hand and he tilted the barrel ever so slightly so that the gun was lined on the Kid's brisket, and the man said softly, "Howdy, mister. You can just hand over that sack you've got tied to your saddle. And quick!"

And you could throw gear on a comet and let the Kid go larruping across the skies if that man wasn't Rance Devereaux himself!

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Way of the Kid

YES, sir, it was Devereaux wearing the Manana Kid's strained-at-the-seams clothes and holding the Kid's worn Colt in his hand; and there was a grin a mile wide spread across Devereaux's hook-nosed face. He repeated his instructions relative to the Kid's passing over the loot sack, and the Kid obliged him to the extent of stepping closer to his horse. The Kid said, "I suppose you'll want your duds back, too."

That seemed to amuse Devereaux no end. "Reckon not," he said. "You can have them a while longer and keep on dodging posses for me. You seem to have done a mighty good job of it."

Over Devereaux's shoulder, beyond the boulder against which the hook-nosed man leaned, the Kid could see Devereaux's camp, a spread blanket beside the ashes of a fire. Devereaux's horse was picketed within sight, a wiry buckskin looking long on both speed and bottom. The Kid said, "I know why you let me win at poker. You wanted me to have your clothes so the sheriff from Alder would mistake me for you. It was nice of you to let me win a heap of money, too."

"So?" said Devereaux, his grin growing wider. "I had plenty of money—the loot from the Alder bank. The rest of it is yonder in my saddle-bag. I figgered that if you were caught with some of that nice, new currency on you, that would clinch the case against you. Likely you could prove in time that you weren't Rance Devereaux, but, meanwhile, it stood to reason that you'd be hauled back to Alder to stand trial. All of which would have given me a better chance to be long gone from these parts."

"But you've had a whole day to be hitting the grit, and you've waited here!"

"Mister, when I first sized you up in the light of your campfire back yonder in the hills the other night, I had to know whether you were smart or stupid, straight or

crooked. I'm not altogether sure yet. But any one of a lot of different things could have happened after we swapped clothes. You might have been caught and hauled back to Alder for the bank job I did there—the only job that ever put the law on my trail. That would have been okay with me. But there was a chance that you'd get away. Looks like you did. If you got away, you might or might not have gone to Conestoga. But if you got to Conestoga in those duds, it stood to reason that you'd be mistaken for me, and it also stood to reason that Jared Wood would look you up. Wood had written me about doing a job there, but Wood had never seen me, so Wood wouldn't know you from me. It makes sense, then, that he might have talked that bank job over with you."

"He sure enough did," the Kid admitted.

"Granting that he would, there was still one of two things that could happen," Devereaux said. "If you were straight, you'd go to the Conestoga sheriff and spill the story. That would be too bad for Jared Wood, but it wouldn't put me in the Conestoga pokey since I was safe in the hills. But there was a second chance that you wouldn't be so straight as to pass up a pat job, all hand made on the safe side. It followed that if you took on the job, you'd probably follow the getaway plan that Wood had figured out when he sent me the map, the plan that would head you south to this pass. So that's why I waited. If you didn't come, it only meant that I'd lost a day or two. If you did come, it stood to reason that you'd be packing a hunk of dinero from Wood's bank. I'm guessing that it's not washers you're toting in that canvas sack."

"All that," said the Kid with vast admiration, "was mighty sharp thinking!"

"Nobody ever called me stupid," Devereaux conceded.

"I did some thinking, too," the Kid said blandly. "I figgered that I'd be in a forked stick as long as I was wearing your duds. Especially with Sheriff Dave Bradstreet on the trail. So I figgered that the only real way I could clear myself would be to catch up with you. Ever hear the story of how the town idiot found the lost dog? He just asked himself where he'd be if he was a dog, and he went there, and, sure enough, there was the dog. Now where would a gent like you likely be? Why, waiting here at Tomahawk Pass, since I figured that *you'd* figger just the way you did!"

DEVEREAUX'S grin faded, and he sucked in a long, hard breath. "A smart hombre, eh? But how would cornering me clear *you?* You robbed the Conestoga bank, didn't you? I watched the countryside from the top of the pass, and I could see the dust stirring yonderly this afternoon. One lone rider bee-lined from the town, and twenty men chased him.

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That's what clinched my notion of waiting. I was pretty sure this afternoon that things had worked out for you the way I figgered."

"Sure, I robbed the bank," the Kid admitted. "Got the loot right here. Figgered that if I didn't go through with the robbery, there'd be no pinning the deadwood on Jared Wood. He's a crook and he ought to be in jail. But if I'd gone to the Conestoga sheriff with my yarn, it would just have been my word against Jared Wood's, unless there'd really been a holdup. And my word wouldn't have carried much weight, seeing as I was wearing your reputation as well as your duds. You left Wood's map in those duds, but you must have destroyed his letter—which might have made proof. Nope, it was plumb necessary to rob the bank. That way I got Jared Wood to tangle his twine. By now he's given out the word that thirty thousand was taken from the bank. But I've only got ten thousand in the sack. That makes a liar out of Mr. Wood."

"And who'll believe that?" Devereaux snorted. "When you're caught, they'll figger you're a holdup man telling a wild story to implicate Wood."

"You don't understand," the Kid said patiently. "I put the whole thing down in a letter which I mailed today—before I held up the bank. A letter I mailed to the sheriff of Conestoga. I told him all about swapping clothes with you, and about the proposition Jared Wood made me, and the valise full of depositors' money he's got hidden in his bedroom. I told him I was going through with the holdup just to prove that my story was straight, but that I'd fetch the money back tomorrow."

"You crazy fool!" Devereaux thundered. "You say you guessed I'd be waiting here. You wanted to wrap up both Wood and me and hand us over to the law. Did you think I'd take that sitting down? Have you forgotten I've got a gun lined on you?"

"*That* gun?" said the Kid. "I reckon you've had no reason to use it since you swapped with me the other night. Otherwise you'd know that it's got a busted spring. I meant to tell you about that at the time, but you wouldn't wait to listen. Always meant to have that spring fixed—*mañana.*"

Devereaux stared at the gun in his fist, angrily jerked at the trigger, and, with the realization of the truth bursting upon him, lifted the gun and hurled it straight at the face of the Manana Kid. The Kid bobbed his head and let the gun go sailing. Three long strides brought him to Devereaux, and the Kid fetched up his right fist from somewhere in the vicinity of his knees and took joy in the sound of his knuckles smashing against Devereaux's jaw. He was still wearing Devereaux's black-butted guns, and he could have used either of them to subdue Devereaux—there was nothing wrong with *those* guns—but this method was a heap more fun. He owed Devereaux a good trouncing, and the steady beat of his fists smashed the hook-nosed man back against the boulder and pinned him there, and though Devereaux got his own fists up and managed to get in a lick or two, it was all the Kid's show.

Ten minutes later Devereaux was flat upon the ground, groaning his way back to consciousness while the Kid was sitting on his chest, thoughtfully shaping up a cigarette. And this was the way the two of them were when a string of riders came pouring down the trail with Sheriff Dave Bradstreet of Alder leading them. You had to say this for Bradstreet—he certainly could smell out a trail. The posse sent up a great shout at sight of the quarry; they piled out of saddles and formed a gun-bristling ring around the two; and Linda Bradstreet, who was once again riding with her father, was shoved to the front.

"We've got him now," Dave Bradstreet said grimly. "Have a good long look at him, Linda. Is he the man?"

THE Kid had come to a stand, still working at the cigarette. Rance Devereaux pulled himself to a sitting position and was gingerly feeling his jaw and looking as though he was quite astonished to find it still intact. Linda looked from one man to the other, and then she said, "I don't know what to make of this! This black-garbed fellow is certainly wearing the clothes I saw in Alder, no mistake about it. But now that there's two of them to look at, I'd swear that the other one has the face."

"Have a look in his saddle-bag," the Kid suggested. "You'll find your Alder money there."

That just about clinched it, that and the story the Manana Kid told as a fire was

stirred to life and coffee set to bubbling. It was the whole story, the yarn of the poker game and the mistake that all Conestoga had made, and it had to do with Jared Wood and a letter written to the sheriff of Conestoga, and all the rest of it. When the Kid had finished, Sheriff Dave Bradstreet said, "Well be riding back to Conestoga as soon as we've eaten. We'll find out if there is such a letter as you say."

"Good," the Kid said dreamily. "Me, I want to see Jared Wood's face when the law fishes that valise out of his bedroom and slaps the handcuffs on him. Looks like a bird, that feller does. Bet he'll feel like a bird that warmed up an egg and found out too late that it was loaded with gunpowder."

An hour later the cavalcade was winding up over Tomahawk Pass and pointing toward Conestoga through the moonlit night. The Kid rode pocketed by men, ostensibly a prisoner, yet it was Rance Devereaux who was tied to a saddle. Devereaux was maintaining a surly silence, but he had the look of a man who knows that he is licked. And there was no worry in the Kid. A letter to that spread he'd worked for on Milk River would let the law know that he was the Manana Kid and not Rance Devereaux. If worse came to worse he'd write such a letter—*manana*. But in the meantime Jared Wood would be lodged in jail, and so would the real Rance Devereaux, and that was damn well as it should be.

Then the Kid found that Linda Bradstreet had edged up until she was riding stirrup to stirrup with him, and she said softly, "I'm certain now that I owe you an apology. Dad's sure that you're innocent and that we'll find the proof waiting in Conestoga. Can you forgive?"

"Sure," said the Kid with a grand gesture. "It was a natural mistake."

"Perhaps you'll ride up to Alder someday," she said. "Our latchstring will always be out to you. It would give the Bradstreets a chance to show that we're repentant."

He gave her a long, sharp look. Was there more behind this invitation than met the ear? You went riding to visit a girl, and the first thing you knew you were hanging around, letting one day run into another, and then you woke up to find yourself standing in front of a preacher who was tying the knot. The Kid wasn't a marrying man. Marriage anchored you and kept you from looking on the other side of hills. Yet . . . He stole another look at her, seeing the sweetness of her face, the promise in her eyes. A man might be content to cease his roaming if there was somebody like her in his kitchen whipping up a cake. A man might find a girl like her to be a pretty good bargain in the long run.

*'Sta bueno!* The Kid sighed contentedly. There was a just balance in all things!

THE END

# WHEELS ROLLING WEST

SOUTH PASS, in Wyoming's Rocky Mountains, over which countless prairie schooners rolled west for California and Oregon, was discovered by Robert Stuart in 1812. Stuart, a Scotchman, in the employ of John Jacob Astor, crossed the continent that year on his trip east from Astoria. The lateness of the season compelling him and his men to winter in Wyoming, they built temporary shelters, the first cabins in that territory. The first permanent dwelling was erected in 1828 by Antonio Mateo, a Portuguese, who built a trading post on the Powder River.

Though Stuart actually discovered the pass, credit generally goes to Jebediah Smith, a mountain man employed by William Ashley, who crossed the Rockies in 1824, going west exploring the country for beaver. Stuart didn't publicize his discovery and consequently no one benefited by it. Jebediah Smith, on the other hand, spread the good word and thousands of emigrants profited by using this easy grade.

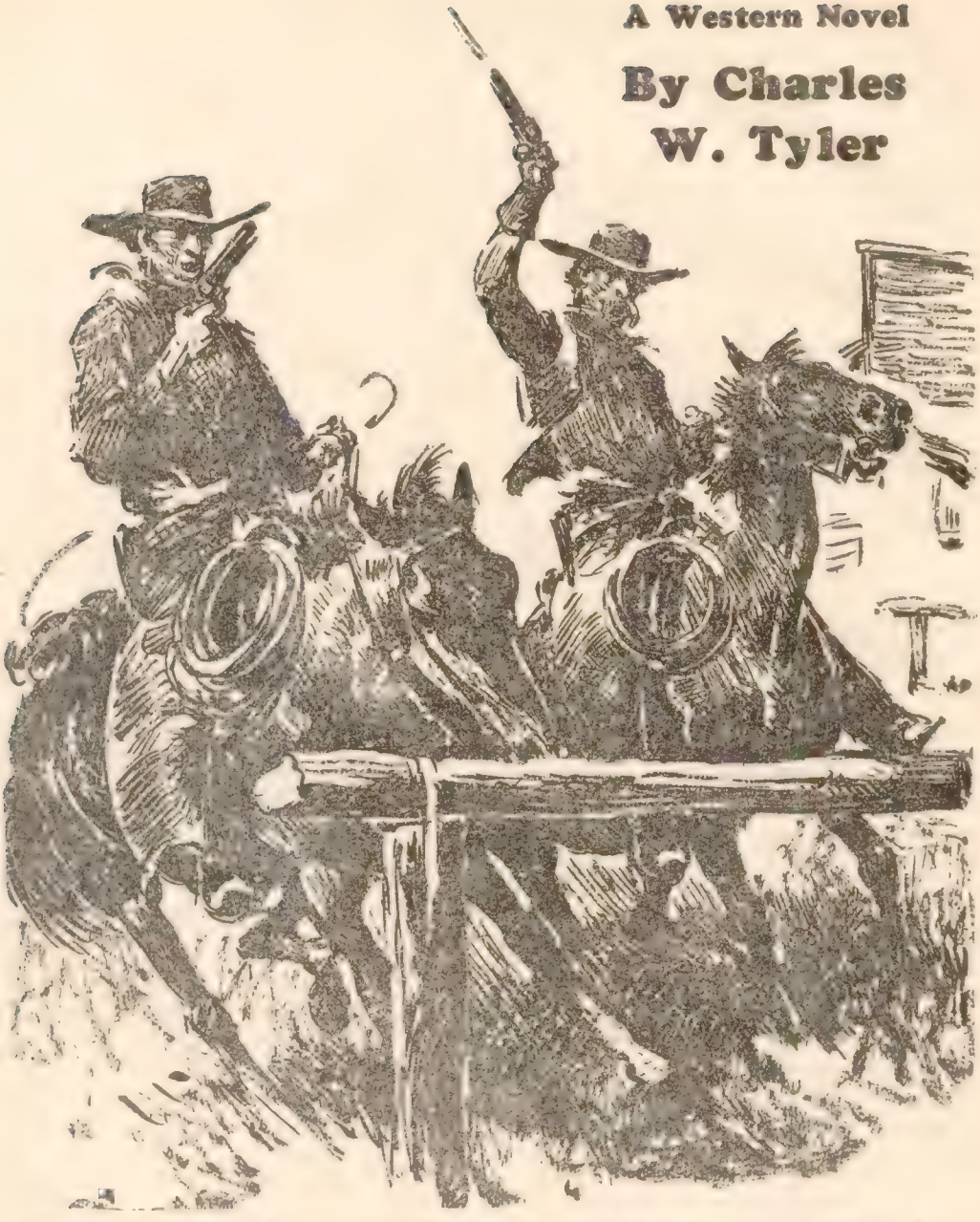
The first wagons over South Pass were the ten William Sublette took to the Wind River mountain men's rendezvous in 1830. Two years later Captain Bonneville crossed also with wagons, and in 1838 Marcus Whitman, the missionary, took a cart as far as Fort Boise.

Strange to say, no railroad or highway goes over South Pass today. Modern engineering has built shorter routes between main cities. A mere dirt road marks South Pass today, used only by ranchers and sheepherders, and an occasional tourist, the hardy variety of student who wishes to see just where it was his forbears crossed the continental backbone.

—*Roy Vandergoot*

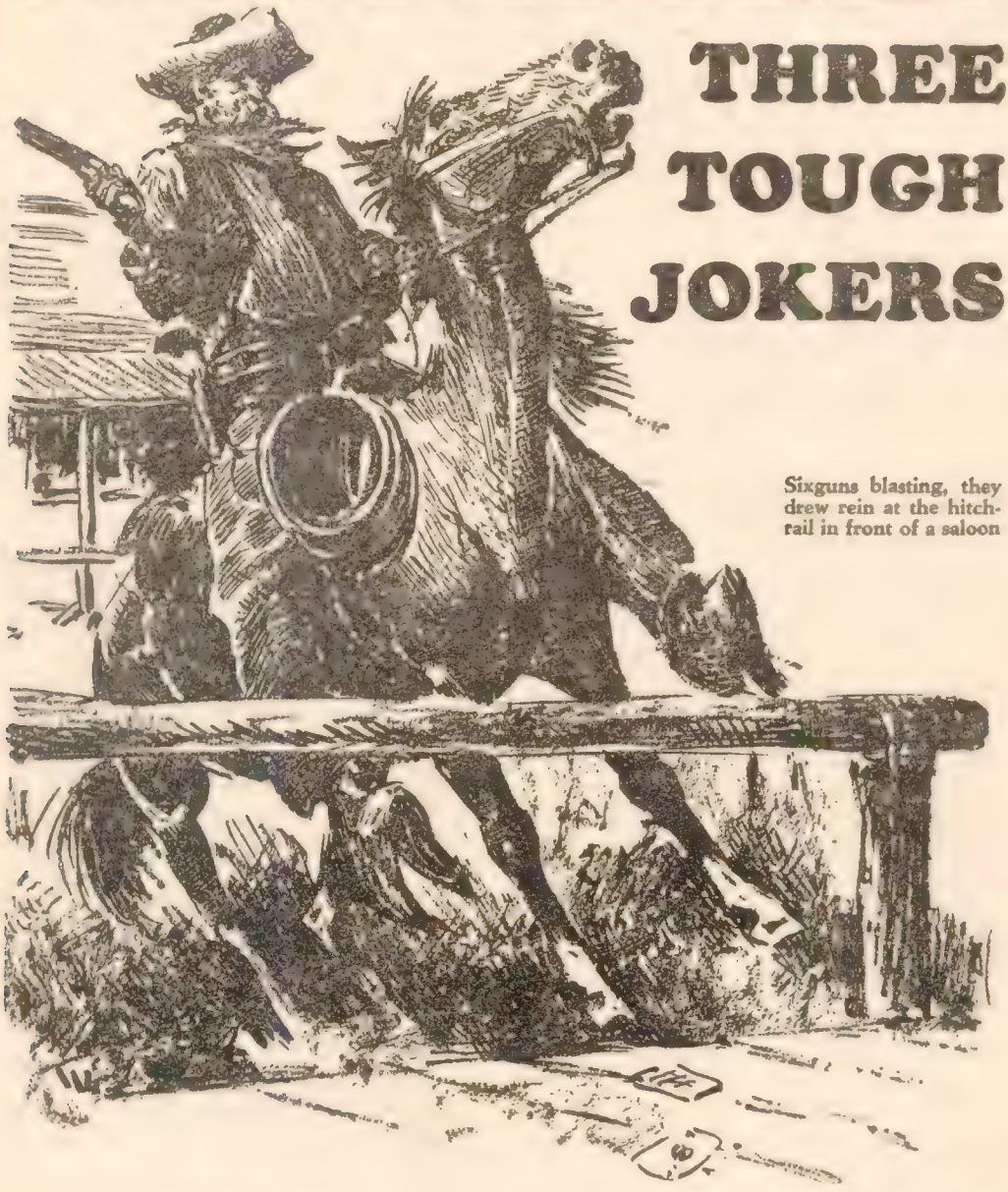
A Western Novel

# By Charles W. Tyler



Those two mossyhorns and the slick-eared kid were home again in Texas. And yes, in spite of the dust and the heat, the drought that struck down man and beast alike, and those howling blue northers, Texas was their country. For Texas folks were tops—except, mebbe, a few sons whose killing would be looked upon as an all around public service. And those fabulous Three Texas Hellions—old Dewlap, old Wattles and the young Hairpin Kid—sure had their .45's chock-full of public weal!

# THE DEVIL DEALS THREE TOUGH JOKERS



Sixguns blasting, they drew rein at the hitch-rail in front of a saloon

## CHAPTER ONE

### Wanted—Dead or Alive!

THEY had come down the long, long miles of the big *jornado*—three Texas hellions heading back to Big Spur and the old Lazy Cross: Dewlap, Wattles and the Hairpin Kid.

It had been a full year since they had begun their far *pasear*—a year in which their traildust had waved on a gunsmoke range half a thousand miles west of the Pecos. It was good to breathe the air of Texas again, to know they were back where the discharge of six-shooters in town was tolerantly regarded as nice, clean fun.

The sun was warm and the land was

bright, and even the stars of Texas sheriffs, they felt, would be welcome sights for their hungry eyes. There would be open arms to greet them, the soul-warming sociability of Big Bender whiskey at the bar and convivial pards crowding around to hear the tales they told of strange "center-fire" rigs, of "dally" men and California reatas.

Ah, yes! Texas! In spite of its heat, drought and blue northers, it was a good country. Texas sons were folks—except, mebbe, a few of loathesome ilk, whose killing would be looked upon as an all around improvement.

The hoarfrost of age had sprinkled the hair and drooping mustaches of Dewlap and Wattles, but their eyes were bright and their souls flamed with perpetual youth. The Hairpin Kid, slim, blue-eyed and twenty, had long ago accepted these grizzled cowpokes as his godfathers, and he was content to follow where they led.

Dewlap lifted his cracked voice in song.

*"Th' sher'f up an' hit his stride,*
*An' Whiskey Bill lit fer th' Great*
*Divide. . . ."*

Old Wattles chimed in and the Hairpin Kid grinned at their exuberance. A feller never did appreciate his homeland until he strayed. They rode on—two ringy old sintwisters and a kid, prideful of all that was Texas.

False-fronts loomed ahead in the shimmering haze of the Texas plain, a Texas town a-sprawl in the path of the setting sun. Two Gun.

In the days when Texas longhorns had been slogging north to Dodge, Caldwell and Abilene, Two Gun had been a hell-roaring trail town and its weathered buildings wore the bullet scars from the guns of whooping cowboys, released for a little from the hardships of "trailin' 'em north."

But now the great drives were done and Two Gun lay lazy and peaceful on the plain.

As the three dusty riders approached, old Dewlap leaned forward and picked up the rein-slack. "What say we sing 'em a leetle lead song fer ole time's sake?"

"Shorely." Wattles' rope-scarred hand flapped to his six-shooter's butt. He kicked in the spurs and emitted a long-drawn warwhoop.

Sleepy Two Gun came awake with a jolt, and as promptly its sidewalks and galleries were emptied of loungers. It was a little surprising, the Hairpin Kid thought; almost like they were really badmen and killers.

"I'm a she-wolf," Dewlap chanted, "an' t'-night's my night to haowl!"

"Ye-e-ow!" Wattles screeched, and dimpled a false-front with bullets.

Sixguns blasting, they drew rein at the hitchrail in front of a saloon with eminent satisfaction. Cautious heads appeared at a respectful distance, but no one came into the open.

Dewlap and Wattles stepped from the saddle and went trooping through the door into the bar. The Hairpin Kid found his attention drawn to a poster at the corner of the building, and he dismounted and went toward it, conscious of the hush that had not only fallen on the street but inside of the saloon, as well.

It was a familiar sort of poster, the Kid observed—the kind a fellow saw in post offices and public places. A poster with pictures and words in black-face type shouting of wanted men. The Hairpin Kid stared, a trickle of coldness running down his spine. He became aware, then, of a flutter of furtive activity in the vicinity of a building marked HARDWARE.

The Kid's eyes grew big. The printing on the poster read:

**$2,000 REWARD!**
**WANTED**
**DEAD OR ALIVE**
**THE THREE TEXAS HELLIONS**

In smaller type below was a long list of crimes, including murder, train robbery, bank robbery and horse stealing. There were individual pictures, arranged around a not-too-distinct group picture of two mustached oldsters and a slightly undersized young cowboy.

The Hairpin Kid moistened his dry lips with his tongue. He was looking at the undeniable likeness of himself and old Dewlap and Wattles. He remembered distinctly when the picture had been taken that time they'd been in San Antone. They sure looked tough all right, but there was some awful mistake. Until today, they had not been in Texas for over a year.

But there it was: *Wanted! Dead or alive!*

THE Kid pushed back his flop-brimmed hat and whistled softly. He thought of the Lazy Cross, the old home ranch, and of honest Luther Tuttle and "Ma," and Sad Sam the wrangler. He and his two pards had always gravitated back there, to recount their adventures proudly and talk again of old times.

He'd been a homeless youngster of twelve when Luther and Ma had taken him in, and Dewlap and Wattles began educating him in the arts of ridin' an' ropin' an' triggernometry. Because he had shown the ability to stick a-fork of almost anything in horsehide, they'd called him the Hairpin Kid.

The Lazy Cross now was not the great outfit it had once been, and the hands had drifted away. Still, there was the old loyalty and pride of the iron. Once they'd come back to side old Luther when greedy, ruthless men had tried to make a big steal. Other times they had brought presents and money—honest, hard-earned money. They were sloping back to the Lazy Cross now to help with the fall round-up.

The Hairpin Kid's eyes moved along the street; he glimpsed a figure hugged against a wall a block away, a bright star on his vest, a six-shooter in his hand. The Kid headed for the batwing doors, little beads of cold sweat on his forehead. He'd got to warn Dewlap an' Wattles. . . .

Those craggy features, handle-bar mustaches and flat-crowned hats were too clearly etched in the minds of the occupants of the saloon for them to mistake this pair for the hellion trio that had been terrorizing the country. They were desperadoes of the worst sort, men who shot to kill with little or no provocation.

The bartender took one look and dropped from sight. The few customers at the bar turned, shot their hands above their heads and froze.

Old Dewlap blinked his astonishment. Wattles stopped and stared. Something was wrong and he grew wary. The sudden ducking of the white-aproned figure behind the bar could be a hostile maneuver, for Texas bartenders usually had a gun handy, in case of emergency. Whatever the gent's intentions, Dewlap promptly acted to prevent their bearing fruit. He jerked out his six-shooter, which he now remembered he had neglected to reload, and dashed around the end of the bar like a greased pig.

"Stand up, ye badger," he cried, "an' h'ist 'em!"

The cowering bartender straightened, raised his hands. "Don't shoot! There's money in the till."

Dewlap scowled. "What the hell's got into ye? All I want is a leetle whiskey fer my campfire."

Wattles considered a certain amount of respect due gentlemen of their accomplishments, but this show of abject terror puzzled him. Once Two Gun had been a camp without a lid, a place where a hombre conducted himself according to his shooting ability. He was saddened by this apparent reformation; it seemed a pathetic prophesy of a Texas turning soft.

"Me an' my pard is jist a couple ole mossyhorns with dust in our craws an' burrs in our tails," said Wattles. "Us an' the Kid outside 'low to bed down—"

Someone said in an undertone, "Two old ones an' a kid. It's the Texas hellions all right."

"We heerd of yuh," said one of the men at the bar, "an' we don't want no trouble."

Dewlap waved his six-shooter. "I got fourteen rattles an' a button."

The Hairpin Kid shoved through the door, his blue eyes a-cloud with trouble. Wattles had hooked his thumbs in the armpits of his vest and was waggling his fingers. "We're notorious kerackters." In days gone by they had earned a reputation as saloon-busters without peer and he felt it but fitting that they should continue to uphold the distinction of being uncurried, untamed and generally bad medicine.

Dewlap, warming to the spirit of the thing, began to eject the empty shells from his sixgun, which reminded Wattles that in his anxiety to slake his thirst he too had been remiss in the matter of reloading his .44.

"There's a poster out there that says we're outlaws!" the Kid blurted.

Feeling that their wickedness was established sufficiently to maintain a proper decorum, Dewlap was slowly plucking fresh cartridges from his gun-belt. Wattles was working the ejector rod with studied deliberation when the words of the Hairpin Kid penetrated the pleasant feeling of mastery that surrounded him.

"Outlaws?" He stiffened, his mustache

suddenly a-bristle, his eyes growing wide.

"Two thousand dollars reward, it says." The Kid jerked his head toward the door. "Dead or alive!"

Old Dewlap's Adam's apple pumped violently. "The hell ye say!"

Wattles opened his mouth, but the words died a-borning. The bartender dropped his hands and made a grab under the counter. Dewlap said, "Goddlemighty an' General Jackson!" They had been caught on the horns of dilemma—with empty guns.

THE HAIRPIN KID, dazedly gaping at the poster, had mechanically poked fresh cartridges into the chamber of his six-shooter; then jammed it into its holster. Now the suddenly hostile move of the bartender startled him, but his hand was darting for pistol-butt almost before his brain had telegraphed a warning.

The dark bores of a sawed-off .12-gauge snaked across the top of the bar and twin *clicks* made small dents in the instant of dead silence. The bartender was in a crouch, with only his round, florid face showing. The Kid cleared his gun and fired.

The bullet plowed a furrow in the polished surface of the bar and slapped into a whiskey bottle, which exploded not a foot from the bartender's head. The shotgun muzzles jerked upward, belching buckshot, as the saloon keeper was rocked onto his haunches by the flying glass.

The buckshot pellets screeched over the heads of Dewlap and Wattles. The Kid's sixgun swung to cover the men before the bar. "The first hombre that makes a pass gets a slug in his belly!"

Dewlap and Wattles loaded their weapons, backing toward the door. "A badge-toter's headin' this way," the Kid warned them.

"He's jist goin' t' git tromped t' death," wheezed old Dewlap.

"Never was so mortified in me life," palpitated Wattles.

The swinging doors batted outward and the two oldsters surged to the sidewalk. The Hairpin Kid, covering the retreat of his pards, backed from the saloon.

The badge-toter had pulled up a half block away. There had not been time to organize armed resistance and he had no stomach for standing up to such widely advertised badmen. But that these were the Texas hellions, he had no doubt. He threw a wild shot their way and jumped for cover.

Dewlap, Wattles and the Kid rounded the hitchrail on the run, to snatch at the dropped reins of their horses and claw into the saddle. A moment later they were racing down the street in a cloud of dust, whooping and shooting into the air.

Fretful Two Gun was below the horizon behind them when they finally slowed their mounts and took stock of the situation.

Dewlap eyed his ancient pard with distaste. "Ye ain't got the brains God give a rabbit, ye loco ole ijit, projectin' into a den of iniquity complete dehorned that-away."

"I dunno why I go rackin' 'round with a whiskered ole so-an'-so like you anyhow," cried Wattles in high lament.

"Jist a raveled out sheep," croaked Dewlap, flapping his hand in disgust.

"Shet up, ye ole buzzard," snarled Wattles, " 'fore I lose possession of myself an' bat ye one."

The Hairpin Kid grinned. Dewlap and Wattles were forever jawing and cussing each other out, but it didn't mean a thing. When the chips were down either would instantly rally to the support of his pardner.

Dewlap turned to the Kid. "Ye shouldn't ought t' come hoorawin' into that there saloon, button, tellin' as how we was outlaws," he said reprovingly. "It raised a blemish on our escutcheon."

"It was on a poster," the Kid insisted. "It had our pictures an' everythin', an' says we was wanted for murder, robbery an' hoss stealin'."

"Sure enough?" Dewlap batted his faded eyes, seemingly intrigued by their sudden dubious notoriety.

" 'Low it accounts fer them ohmbrays gittin' spooky," said Wattles, tugging at his drooping mustache thoughtfully.

"The sitcheration contain possibilities leetle short of ridiculous," ruminated old Dewlap.

"Shorely," opined Wattles. "The same bein' gittin' hung."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Hellions Ride the Owlhoot

SERGEANT JIM TASKER, of the Texas Rangers, had not been able to quite make up his mind whether Dewlap,

Wattles and the Hairpin Kid were hardcases or just three salty specimens with a liking for adventure. He had cut their trail once or twice in the past, finding them tricky as brush steers and as hard to corral.

The last Tasker had heard the hellion trio had left Texas. That had been a year ago. Not long thereafter a series of train and bank robberies in western Texas and the lower Panhandle had claimed the attention of local officers and the Rangers. The three men involved answered the description of Dewlap, Wattles and the Hairpin Kid. Further, they had left taunting messages on several occasions with crudely lettered signatures: "The Three Texas Hellions."

The trio was cunning and ruthless, looting and killing with an abandon that marked them as desperadoes of the worst sort. Shotgun riders and stage drivers had been fired on from ambush, bank tellers shot down in cold blood and Texas and Pacific trainmen and express messengers wantonly murdered.

There had been growing evidence that their hideout was somewhere in the vicinity of Big Spur, a cow town not far from the Lazy Cross. As time passed little room was left for doubt that the wanted men were Dewlap, Wattles and the Hairpin Kid.

Jake Stoll, the sheriff at Big Spur and long a friend of Luther Tuttle, was reluctant to believe that the two old punchers and the kid were the men they wanted.

"Them old bats have raised more hell in their day than any dozen men," he had said, "but I can't believe they would turn outlaws. Still, there's somethin' queer."

The sheriff, visiting the Lazy Cross, had noticed the pictures and taken them along, over the violent protests of Luther Tuttle and his wife. Holdup victims had identified the cowboys pictured as the robbers in spite of the kerchiefs that masked their faces.

Later these pictures had appeared on posters, which had been widely distributed. Promptly a great hue and cry was raised, with the Lazy Cross the victim of public sentiment, for it was felt that Luther Tuttle must have been giving aid to his former cowhands.

As though in defiance of all this clamor, the Big Spur bank was robbed in daylight. A man had been killed and old Jake Stoll wounded. It was later established that the bandits had secured remounts out at the Lazy Cross ranch, which further strengthened the opinion that Luther Tuttle was indirectly involved.

His closest friends took to avoiding him and scandalized eyebrows were lifted. Old Sad Sam, the wrangler, journeying to town for his usual Saturday night bender, had defended his friends in the Maverick Bar, waxing combative to a point where it had become necessary for the marshal to throw his pants in the pokey.

Sergeant Jim Tasker had trailed the robbers for weeks, only to discover that the trail had either fouled out or the suspects he came up with were the wrong men. At no time, to his knowledge, had he even come close to the outlaws. Their elusiveness not only aggravated him but made him more determined than ever to bring them to justice.

Today, having been informed that the Two Gun stage had a heavy money shipment in its strong box, he had arranged to ride it as a passenger, on the small chance that he might come to grips with the outlaws.

It had been a long, wearying ride out of Sage City in the late-summer heat, with nothing to break the monotony of the great plains but the stage stops and those posters of the Texas Hellions, as a constant reminder of the dread road agents.

The tension eased, however, as the last horse change was made and the lumbering stage coach began its final lap of the journey to Two Gun. Slowly it climbed the steeply ascending grade out of the Las Trampas arroyo. Dusk was settling there, while the sun etched the high rims in gold.

The driver pulled up on the turn of a switchback to let the horses blow. The rider, his shotgun across his knees, filled his pipe. In the coach one or two passengers were dozing. A drummer, in conversation with Sergeant Jim Tasker, was saying, "I'm a little disappointed; I've traveled hundreds of miles by stage and never have had a look at highwaymen."

Jim Tasker's ears picked up the *clip-clop* of horses and he had a glimpse of three riders approaching—two old ones and a kid. "It's never too late my friend," he said softly.

The bank and the turn of the switchback

hid the standing stage until the horsemen were almost on it. Thus the surprise of the meeting was more or less mutual. The driver uttered a startled oath and popped his hands into the air, mistaking a peaceful gesture for a gun move. The rider made a belated attempt to bring up his shotgun, but after their near call in the Two Gun saloon Dewlap and Wattles were chary of these weapons and they sprung their six-shooters with alacrity.

The rider had visions of a gory ending on the high box and he quit the stage in a wild leap that sent him soaring into a brush clump on the downhill side of the narrow road. The shotgun was discharged in mid-air and the roar of it tore open the silent twilight of the Las Trampas.

The drummer gurgled, "God be merciful!" and flopped onto the floor.

Jim Tasker eased out of the stage on the bank side and leveled his six-shooter across the rumps of the wheelers, his hard-edged voice hitting at the horsemen beyond.

"Drop those guns!"

OLD DEWLAP thought he recognized the flat-crowned black hat and the lean features under it. Certainly there was no mistaking that bleak and authoritative command. Rangers were tough hombres. According to the Hairpin Kid, those posters read: "Dead or alive!" No sense in trying to shoot their way out of the present predicament.

The hard voice behind the off-wheeler boded trouble—big trouble. "This is Sergeant Tasker, of the Texas Rangers, and I'll shoot to kill!"

"Life is a problem," said Dewlap with a sigh, and holstered his gun.

"Shorely," said Wattles, apparently resigned to the worst.

"Ye got a leetle the advantage," Dewlap said, elevating his gnarled hands, "an' we abhor vi'lence."

"Abserloot," said Wattles, adding meekly, "Me, I was raised a pet." He poked his shooting-iron back into the leather and brought up his hands.

"Shut up!" said Sergeant Tasker. It had been his experience that conversation with these hellions was simply a preface to violent complications. He then directed that they drop their gun-belts. "One gent at a time. Loose the buckles with the left hand, and no damn monkey business about it."

The stage driver breathed softly through his teeth. He had expected gun-play and a possible bullet through his middle. But the Ranger, living up to the tradition of his kind, had out-gamed and out-bluffed three of the worst bandits in the business. He'd have a story to tell when they pulled into Two Gun.

Suddenly old Dewlap yanked off his hat and flapped it at the heads of the leaders, lunging his mount forward under spur and emitting a wild whoop.

Wattles, taking his cue from his pard, hunched low in the saddle and sided Dewlap, letting out a blood-curdling yell. The Hairpin Kid came in from the outside, throwing the two lead horses into a tight turn. The swing horses were flung back against the wheelers, and the six animals were instantly in a tangle of horseflesh and harnesses.

The pole of the stagecoach was carried hard around to the right, cramping the front wheels sharply. The coach rocked on the great leather through-braces.

Sergeant Tasker managed one shot before he was caught by the wildly milling stage horses and thrown against the cut-bank. The next instant the top-heavy stagecoach crashed onto its side, to the accompaniment of distressed howls from within. The driver partly jumped and was partly thrown clear, landing a-sprawl at the road's edge and almost under the hoofs of the horses of the three squalling riders, kiting away into the deepening shadows of the Las Trampas arroyo.

Sergeant Tasker extricated himself from the confused jumble that had enveloped him and limped around the rear boot of the overturned stage, surveying the scene with a look of mingled exasperation and puzzlement.

The shotgun rider threshed out of the thicket on the slope below, mumbling oaths. The driver picked himself up experimentally, seemingly surprised at finding he was still alive. The drummer cautiously poked his head from a window opening on the up side of the coach.

An object at the side of the road caught the eye of Jim Tasker and he stared at it. It was the strong box with the money shipment, apparently thrown there when the stage had overturned. The three hellions

could not have helped but see it, for they had ridden over it in their flight. With the occupants of the stage at their mercy they had passed up the chance to loot it.

In the distance Ranger Tasker heard the dimming drumbeat of hoofs, and his eyes narrowed speculatively. Two unpredictable old whang-hides and a kid were riding hell-bent down the owlhoot.

HUNGER gnawed at the vitals of Dewlap, Wattles and the Hairpin Kid. They had not eaten since morning and there was not so much as a wallet of hard biscuits in their saddlebags. Their hope of obtaining meals and lodging at Two Gun had gone glimmering, and Sage City was miles away.

Coming out of the arroyo they saw the buildings of the Las Trampas stage station in the gray dusk. A light came on as they approached but its gleam held no welcome, for they were high-liners now and every man's hand would be against them.

Besides grub, they needed fresh mounts, for a posse would soon be dogging them, if one had not already been formed back at Two Gun. Sergeant Tasker was bound to dispatch a courier to the nearest telegraph office and word would be flashed to Ranger headquarters on the Brazos, to every sheriff in the country.

They'd be targets for hot lead at every turn, like Sam Bass and his train robbers when they had hit Round Rock some years before. Sam Bass was six feet under clay.

"Good ole Texas," croaked Dewlap.

"Good ole hell!" gloomed Wattles.

"We can't even go back to Big Spur an' the Lazy Cross now," the Hairpin Kid said cheerlessly.

"We been infringed on," Dewlap said. "There oughta be a law."

"I'd admire to meet up with them wahoos what done this to us," growled Wattles; "I'd shore git skelps."

"We got to fan our tails some place remote," said Dewlap, "an' lay low."

"I knowed a tickbird over Johnson Run way onecet," Wattles said by way of a suggestion. A tickbird was a slightly off-color gentleman who harbored outlaws—for a price.

"If them badge-toters run our sign to a tickbird's hole-up," Dewlap hooted, "ye're goin' t' wisht ye had been born a female, ye ole scapoose. Damn it all, shut up!"

When they reined up before the main house at the stage station the three riders saw a poster on the wall. Dewlap and Wattles craned their necks and made out the black-lettered words in the failing light.

**$2,000 REWARD!**
**WANTED**
**DEAD OR ALIVE**
**THE THREE TEXAS HELLIONS**

"She's a lot of dinero," sighed Dewlap.

"Mebbe we could make a dicker if we give ourselfs up," Wattles said brightly.

"If we went back to the Lazy Cross," the Hairpin Kid said, "an' let Luther Tuttle turn us over to the sheriff him an' Ma would get the money."

The Kid was always thinking of old Luther and his wife. Things had been tough with them these past years. He reckoned he'd never forget how Luther and Ma had taken him in and raised him up, just like he was their own son. Seemed like he could never repay them.

Somewhere steak was frying and old Dewlap sniffed its fragrance. "I'm so hongry I could eat mutton."

A gaunt-bellied, sorry-eyed man opened the door in answer to Wattles' hail. He gaped at the riders, slack-jawed. The pictures on the poster were too clearly stamped in his mind for him to mistake these men.

"We'd like fer t' git suthin' to eat," said Dewlap, an' a change o' horses."

"Ye're welcome to food," said the gaunt man, "but we have no saddle animals at the station."

Later, when the trio offered payment for their meal and the grain for their horses, the station keeper showed surprise and was reluctant to accept the money, apparently feeling that he was lucky not to have been robbed and murdered.

The three Texas sons mounted up and rode away into the blackness. Night was their ally now; their pursuers would be forced to await daylight to take their trail. Dewlap and Wattles knew the country well, for this was a section of the old Goodnight-Loving Trail into the Panhandle and along it, in days gone by, they had fought Comanches and rustlers.

The Indian threat was done but it was still a country frequented by men of wolf-breed. As they rode they discussed the

situation. Their horses had traveled far that day and they set a leisurely pace, feeling that this was a time for craft rather than haste.

They decided finally that it would be best to separate. Riding together they could be identified easily—two oldsters and a kid. Their group individuality would be lost, however, if each went his way alone. There was but one slightly doubtful factor in this plan, and that was old Dewlap. Dewlap was a damn tough problem.

Left to his own devices, Dewlap was prone to become involved in highly explosive situations, the result of what was known a "high lonesome." A high lonesome was Texas talk for a big drunk.

Fairly docile and ready to listen to reason under ordinary circumstances, old Dewlap not only became garrulous when he had Big Bender whiskey under his belt but was as unpredictable as a lightning bolt. He made dubious friendships and bragged of his wickedness, inviting upon his head things too horrible for words.

Wattles and the Hairpin Kid, knowing this, were reluctant to further invite calamity by allowing the old hellion to long remain at large while unaccompanied, but there now seemed to be no alternative.

The final rendezvous, it was agreed, was to be the Lazy Cross ranch. Even now Luther Tuttle would be readying the wagon for the round-up and he'd be needing them. They realized that return to their old outfit might be attended with serious consequences, but they were willing to chance it, feeling that if the worst came to the worst they might somehow manage to channel that reward into the hands of Luther and Ma.

To confuse pursuit Dewlap, Wattles and the Hairpin Kid doubled back on their tracks shortly before dawn. Then, as they prepared to wend their separate ways, they had a last word together.

"Behave yoresе'f, ye ole badger," Wattles admonished Dewlap, "an' don't git in no rinctums."

"I'm a reformed man," Dewlap said solemnly. He stroked his mustache, a dreamy look in his washed-out old eyes.

The Kid said adios with a lump in his throat. They had been through a lot together—him an' Dewlap an' Wattles—and there was no telling what was in store for them, now that they were on the dodge.

They rode away at last—three shadowy forms, slowly dissolving in the Texas dawn.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Wells Fargo Gun-Pard

SPANISH BEND was a town of bad men and bad whiskey. It sprouted hell in all of its forms and was magnificent in its wickedness.

The days of the great buffalo herds were done and there was little but scattered bunches of the shaggy brutes and bleaching bones left from the slaughter. The industry was cast high and dry, and men who called themselves buffalo hunters were turning to other pursuits. Many became cattle thieves and desperadoes, who prowled the plains in bands.

The drift of some of these men took them to Spanish Bend, which had both its fleshpots and a general lawlessness that suited them well. The town was unadulterated poison to badgetoters and Rangers, with the result that guns set afire frequent incendiary situations that lawmen were content to disregard, the general sentiment being that if the hard-cases in town wanted to kill one another off it would be well for all concerned.

It had been some years since old Dewlap had whooped 'er up in Spanish Bend, but he remembered the place with a sentimental fondness for its free-and-easy sociability. In days gone by, he recalled, a man did not have to waste time guzzling two-bit whiskey but for one simoleon received enough Big Bender whiskey to promptly lift him to hell and gone.

Arriving at Spanish Bend in the late afternoon, Dewlap stabled his tired horse and then repaired to the Big Dipper, the largest and gaudiest saloon in town. It had changed but little. There were the same old Lulu girls, the same burly bouncers and the same old tinpan piano banging away.

But there was a change in the clientele. Where once there had been drovers and cowpunchers there were now ex-skinners and buffalo hunters, mixed with hard-bitten men of doubtful employment.

Old Dewlap licked his chops, as he breasted up to the bar, his thirst whetted by saloon smells and that inviting array of glasses and bottles on the back-bar. It had

been a long time between drinks. A long time, too, since he had enjoyed the unfettered freedom that allowed of a high lonesome; thus he entered into the spirit of the thing as one adventuring into delightful realms too rarely explored.

Ordinarily, Wattles and the Hairpin Kid were around to either rescue him from the wreckage of come saloon or safely deliver him from the confines of the local pokey, but now they were far away. Whatever sins of commission accrued would be his to expiate —for better or for worse.

Dewlap found, beside him at the bar, a little man with whom he fell into conversation by the simple expedient of inviting the other to have a drink.

"Don't mind if I do," said the sad-eyed stranger. He offered his hand. "My name is Amos Riskin."

"Jist call me Dewlap," said Dewlap.

The drinks were ordered and downed, and promptly Dewlap's world took on a roseate hue.

"Your face is familiar," said Amos Riskin, examining the craggy countenance of old Dewlap in the back-bar mirror. "Very familiar."

"Hell, it oughta be," said Dewlap. "They got 'er plastered all over Texas, along with my two pards."

"I want to know," said Amos Riskin politely. For some six months he had been searching for the real-life counterparts of certain widely publicized hellions, who, among other crimes, were charged with looting a Wells Fargo express car and killing the messenger.

"I'm a tough ohmbray!" Dewlap announced, hitting the bar a lick. The snakes in the Big Bender whiskey were starting to crawl.

Amos Riskin, a Wells Fargo special agent, had come to Spanish Bend on the chance that among the desperadoes constantly drifting in and out he might pick up the trail of the much-wanted Texas Hellions. He continued to regard old Dewlap in the mirror, speculating on ways and means of bringing about his apprehension, as well as the capture of the remainder of the nefarious trio.

RISKIN was not lacking in courage, but he felt that to attempt an arrest in Spanish Bend would be foolhardy. Better to wait, he decided, until he had notified the nearest sheriff or Sergeant Jim Tasker, of the Rangers, with whom he had already been in contact. In the meantime, he would ingratiate himself into this fellow's confidence.

The boss bartender did not like owly customers and he regarded old Dewlap with displeasure. "Don't get tough in here," he admonished.

Dewlap gave no indication that he had heard the warning, but pushed up his wide-awake hat and peered around. "I kin lick any so-an'-such in the house!"

A few in the saloon had remarked the resemblance between this man and one of the wanted Texas Hellions on the posters about town. Two thousand dollars, or any part of it, was an inducement not to be considered lightly. "Dead or alive!" the placard read. A bullet in the back, at an opportune moment, would suffice.

Thinking to placate the obstreperous one, Amos Riskin ordered a second round of drinks. Old Dewlap smacked his lips over the pleasant ball of fire that exploded in his vitals and turned maudlin for a little.

"I'd like fer ye to meet my two pards," he told Amos Riskin. "We project here an' yon galore, the same as tripulets."

"It would be a pleasure," said Amos Riskin. "Are they about?"

"Nope." Old Dewlap wagged his head sadly. "We part back yander, but we jine up ag'in directly." He waved his hand in a vague indication. He expounded then on the virtues of Wattles and the Hairpin Kid huskily and with tears streaming down his cheeks. "We been a-pardin' 'er a long poke. Yaas, indeedy."

Amos Riskin was duly sympathetic with the old pin-twister.

"Yop," said Dewlap, "an' th' only reason we split bein' we're jist a snort an' a holler ahead o' the sher'f."

"You don't tell," said Amos Riskin.

Dewlap's watery eyes furtively scanned the faces in the back-bar mirror. Suddenly he stiffened, his right hand sliding toward his holster. The gun-hand of the image beyond performed a similarly warlike move.

"Thet ole hellion an' me is pizen!" he hissed.

"It's only your reflection, my friend," said Amos Riskin, ignorant of the whims of old Dewlap when on a high lonesome.

"It's you or me, ye varmint!" screeched Dewlap, assuming a half-crouch.

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Amos Riskin.

The bartender looked down his nose at Dewlap. "Behave yourself, you old ape!" he snarled.

Dewlap, however, was only intent on his feuding. He jerked out his six-shooter and leveled on the foe. The roar of the S. A. Colt and the shattering crash of bottles and mirror blended with the scream of one of the Lulu girls. Promptly bedlam broke in the Big Dipper Saloon.

Amos Riskin, torn between the conflicting fears that his man might escape or be filled full of holes before he had learned the location of the hellion trio's rendezvous, found himself siding one of the most accomplished saloon-busters in all of Texas.

The slug fired into the back-bar mirror had been but a gentle prelude to a manifestation of attempted mayhem, murder and manslaughter such as few in Spanish Bend had ever been privileged to witness.

Old Dewlap, on a high lonesome, let the tail go with the hide, devoting himself to the festivities with an originality and abandon that made strong men shudder.

A bartender grabbed a bung-starter and attempted to bludgeon the erring one into submission, but Dewlap ducked adroitly and the blow fell athwart the skull of an innocent bystander. A second bartender, convinced that the sad-eyed little man and the old hellion were in cahoots, snatched up a whiskey bottle and sent it hurtling at Amos Riskin, of Wells Fargo and Company.

Mr. Riskin, having achieved his present state of well-being only because of his ability to hold up his end when in the company of bad actors, had always subscribed to the principle that little potatoes were hard to peel. He dodged the missile, and at the same time snatched another whiskey bottle from the bar. Thus fortified against the rigors of what gave promise of being a second battle of the Alamo, he deployed to Dewlap's rear and began cracking skulls with gusto.

WHEN the bottle shattered on a particularly hard head, Amos Riskin continued to grip and swing the neck and its wickedly jagged projections. A buffalo skinner, hopeful of cashing in on part of the reward offered for the wanted Texas Hellions, pulled a six-shooter. However, before he could target on old Dewlap Amos Riskin back-handed him across the face with the bottle-top.

The ornate chandelier, shipped in at considerable expense from St. Louis, Dewlap reduced to quivering wreckage with a couple of blasts of his six-shooter. Having thus satisfactorily established his wickedness and in view of the traffic congestion, he holstered his sixgun and laid hold of a chair, which he swung with devastating effect and to the accompaniment of gleeful yowls.

Amos Riskin, at this point, further entered into the spirit of the occasion by pulling a .45 from a shoulder holster and shooting at the bottles on the back-bar.

Old Dewlap emptied his gun into the piano for the sheer joy of hearing it *twang*. Amos Riskin, with a couple bullets left in his Colt, covered the cowed occupants, advising Dewlap that it would be well to reload before they withdrew to the greater seclusion of worlds removed from Spanish Bend.

A few moments later, Dewlap and his new-found friend took their departure. Realizing that their continued good health was now largely a matter of quitting town with dispatch, they speedily rounded a hitchrail and forked a pair of likely-looking saddle horses, the ownership of which they had neither the time nor the inclination to investigate.

"I haven't had so much fun for years," chortled Amos Riskin. There were yells behind, and a few bullets *spanged* past.

"Ye done right smart, Shorty," said old Dewlap, when at last they slowed their horses to a walk.

"So you're an outlaw?" said the detective.

"I ain't braggin'," Dewlap said. "But I don't low them posters would lie, d'ye reckon?" He slid a glance at his companion. "Stranger in these parts?"

"More or less."

They rode in silence for a time; then Amos Riskin said, "It's rather a novel experience, finding myself associated with a train robber."

"Bein' a hoss thief ain't nothin' to brag about," Dewlap reminded him.

"Good grief," said the other, "I hadn't

thought about that. No sir, I hadn't!"

"I ain't holdin' it ag'in ye," Dewlap said patronizingly. He added, " 'Course if ye git ketched they'll likely hang yuh."

They stopped to adjust the stirrups for Mr. Riskin, whose legs were not of the length of the original owner.

"Ye got any hideout in mind?" asked Dewlap.

"Hideout? Why, no." Amos Riskin regarded Dewlap with veiled interest. "Any objections to my accompanying you? I—I'm a bit inexperienced at this game."

"Suits me," said Dewlap.

"Back in Spanish Bend," said Amos Riskin, slyly probing for information, "you mentioned rejoining your companions."

Dewlap had taken a liking to the little man who had so ably sided him in the saloon-busting ruckus, and he figured that Wattles and the Hairpin Kid would admire to meet the gent.

" 'Low they'll be a-waitin' on me at the Lazy Cross," said Dewlap, "up Big Spur way."

Amos Riskin's eyes narrowed. It had not been long ago that he had been in Big Spur, investigating reports that the three wanted men had originally worked for an outfit in the vicinity. He'd talked with Jake Stoll, the sheriff, and questioned an inmate of the jail, a ringy cuss named Sad Sam, a wrangler at the Lazy Cross.

Mr. Riskin knew a feeling of satisfaction. Everything pointed to an early capture of the three desperadoes. Luck, he told himself, had certainly favored him today.

Old Dewlap and the detective spent the night in a draw where, as Dewlap expressed it, they "just covered their bellies with their backs," having no bed-rolls. Breakfast they secured at a ranchhouse, farther on.

The afternoon of the second day they arrived at Big Spur and promptly repaired to the Bright Angel Saloon for refreshments. The bartender on duty, having painful recollections, which he associated with one of a trio of hellions bearing strong resemblance to Dewlap, waggled a finger at the old sintwister.

"Just one yip out of you an' out you go!"

Dewlap smirked amiably, tolerant at the moment even of bartenders. It was good to be back in Big Spur and among friends. Later, him an' Shorty an' his two pards would celebrate with the enthusiasm the occasion of their arrival deserved.

The few occupants of the saloon exchanged surreptitious glances, as they awaited developments. A dozen posters were scattered around town, attesting to the notoriety acquired by Dewlap, Wattles and the Hairpin Kid since they had last been accepted socially in the community. It only remained to be seen whether the former Lazy Cross riders died gloriously in a gun battle or peacefully bowed to arrest and were ignominiously hung by the neck behind the county jail.

Whichever fate was in store for them, it would be a good show.

Jake Stoll, the sheriff, coming along the sidewalk, had stopped to view two horses at the hitchrail which carried the brands of animals reported stolen from in front of a saloon at Spanish Bend. Only yesterday a telegram had reached him, describing the horse thieves and indicating that one of them answered the description of a member of the desperado trio sought by the sovereign state of Texas and the Wells Fargo Company.

At that moment old Dewlap and Amos Riskin came out of the Bright Angel Saloon. Jake Stoll reached for his six-shooter, but checked the movement on recognizing the Wells Fargo detective. At the same time he caught the special agent's warning look.

Old Dewlap eyed Jake Stoll warily. "Howdy, sher'f. Nice weather fer this time o' year."

Jake Stoll was a patient, kindly man, but sight of Dewlap revived aching memories and anger ran through him, not so much because Dewlap, Wattles and the Hairpin Kid had been a thorn in his side in the past but because they had brought scorn and suspicion to the door of honest Luther Tuttle.

"Look, you old hellion," roared the sheriff, "only for the fact that I have to uphold the dignity of my office, I'd cast aside restraint and let nature take its course."

"Reckon we'd best be a-gittin' on, Shorty," said Dewlap hastily, " 'fore complications sot in."

"Shorty?" snorted Jake Stoll, eyeing the detective with some puzzlement. "Hump! Seems you hombres are mighty chummy."

"We'll see you again, Sheriff," said

Amos Riskin, moving around the hitch-rail.

"I expect you will," growled Jake Stoll, "and before very long. Hoss thieves get short shift in these parts."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Trouble at the Lazy Cross

THERE had been great rejoicing at the Lazy Cross upon the arrival of Old Wattles and the Hairpin Kid. Regardless of the hue and cry that had been raised and the crimes of which they had been accused, they were Lazy Cross boys come home again.

Ma Tuttle hugged the Kid and cried over him. Luther almost pump-handled Wattles' arm off, the while labeling him with affectionate epithets. Sad Sam came wheezing asthmatically up from the corral to add his welcome. When the first excited greetings were over there were inquiries concerning Dewlap.

"Done figger the ole t'rantler would be here," said Wattles. He added, "We separate down Las Trampas way, on account of festivities accoomerlate, which it appear thar ain't a-goin' to be no survivors onless we Injun single-file."

The Kid sidled a doubtful glance at Ma and Luther. "Guess yuh been hearin' about us bein' outlaws, but it's all a pack of lies—honest."

"We just knowed they had to be, Hairpin." Ma blinked back the tears.

"Guess we hadn't oughta come back, the way things is," the Kid said, "but we 'lowed if a showdown come we could fix it, mebbe, so's the Lazy Cross would git the reward money."

"How you talk, button," scolded Luther. "We never sold our boys out yet, an' we ain't startin' now. Anyhow, it was partly our fault Jake Stoll got a hold of them pictures."

"I was just startin' supper," Ma said. "I expect you boys are good an' hungry."

"We're plumb ga'nted," said Wattles. He went on, "I come by the ole line camp in th' Lost Man Breaks, figgerin' t' find some grub. That's where I met up with th' Kid."

"I only had a 'Spanish breakfast,'" Hairpin said, meaning that he had just tightened his belt, "an' I knowed there always used to be a grub cache at the Lost Man shack. Guess yuh don't stock it no more."

Luther Tuttle frowned. "I hauled supplies out there only last week."

"She was done cleaned out," Wattles said, "but I knowed ye hadn't worked Lost Man from the Lazy Cross beef steers I seen in the breaks."

"Damn queer," growled Luther Tuttle. The Lost Man line camp had always been the base of operations for the open round-up on that part of the range. The country was so rough that packs had to be used in place of a chuck wagon, which was called "Moonshinin'."

"I seen wheel tracks," Wattles said, "an' cut the sign o' riders a couple days old."

Luther shook his head. "Nobody ever bothered nothin' there before."

The Hairpin Kid scanned the great sagebrush flats anxiously, searching for trail dust. "Dewlap oughta be along."

"I bet seven hundred dollars thet ole catawumpus went on a high lonesome," said Wattles. "Like as not he's in a calaboose some place."

Supper was over and Ma and Luther Tuttle and Sad Sam were in the big living room, listening to the strange tales Wattles and the Kid told of far-off lands when there was the sound of hoofs and a familiar yowl, announcing the arrival of old Dewlap.

Luther Tuttle threw open the door and cried a welcome. "Light down an' look at your saddle, you damned owlhooter."

Wattles and the Kid rushed out to greet their pard.

"Ye rob any more stagecoaches?" cried Wattles, and stopped when he saw the second rider.

"Hell, ye ain't saw nothin'," said Dewlap. "Me an' Shorty, here, we complete fog Spanish Bend to a fare-ye-well."

"Shorty?" said Wattles, squinting hard at Dewlap's companion.

"Yop," said old Dewlap proudly, "we bust 'er wide open."

The Hairpin Kid stared. "Where'd yuh git that hoss?"

"Stole 'er," gloated Dewlap. "Damn near git arrested in Big Spur. Sher'f was on the peck an' we drug."

"Big Spur?" gasped Wattles incredulously. "Sher'f?" It was unthinkable that Dewlap should have dared show himself in

town. "Yuh mean ye tangled with Jake Stoll, ye dumb ole ijit?"

"Me an' Shorty, we h'ist a couple in th' Bright Angel," said Dewlap, "an' when we come out who-all do we behold but ole Jake." He paused to cock an ear for the possible sound of approaching horsemen. "We're shore on the dodge now."

"Good grief!" gulped Wattles. His worst fears had been realized. Old Dewlap had been on a toot and somewhere had not only acquired a stolen horse but an evil companion.

SAD SAM had come from the house to stand gaping at Dewlap and the stranger. The latter had dismounted stiffly and stood in the pale light streaming from the open door. Suddenly Sad Sam's watery eyes popped. His Adam's apple throbbed violently in his throat, partly throttling a distressful squawk. His hands clenched and his jaw stuck out.

Ma Tuttle said, "Land sakes, what's got into ye?"

Old Dewlap waved his paw airily. "Meet my two podners, Shorty."

Amos Riskin regarded Wattles and the Hairpin Kid with bright interest. "It is a pleasure," he said, "to meet two such prominent gentlemen."

Sad Sam's asthmatic wheezing attracted the attention of Amos Riskin at this point and his glance swung toward the gaunt, horse-faced old wrangler. Suddenly the detective's demeanor underwent a change. His eyes took on a steely glint and his lips thinned.

Not a month ago, cast into jail in Big Spur for resorting to violence in the Maverick Saloon in defense of Luther Tuttle, accused of harboring outlaws, Sad Sam had been questioned by the Wells Fargo special agent, who now stood before him in the flesh.

Amos Riskin smiled thinly. "Hullo, Sam. When did you get out?"

"So you two know each other," said Luther Tuttle.

"Oh, yes," said Amos Riskin, "we were in jail together once." Which was, in effect, the truth.

"He's a Wells Fargo detective!" screeched Sad Sam.

"Goddlemighty an' General Jackson!" croaked old Wattles.

Amos Riskin's hand flashed under his coat and brought out a six-shooter. The muzzle swung to cover Dewlap, Wattles and the Hairpin Kid. "I am sorry," he said crisply, addressing Dewlap, "that I must terminate our amiable relations in this manner for I have enjoyed your company immensely."

"I knowed it, ye ole buzzard!" squalled Wattles. "With all of Texas t' pick from, ye would wind up with a dam detective in tow."

Old Dewlap flopped up his hands at the behest of Mr. Riskin, who back at Spanish Bend had shown that he was no slouch with a gun, and regarded the traitorous one with an injured look.

"I shore am disap'inted in ye, Shorty," said Dewlap.

Wattles and the Kid had hung their gunbelts on the back of a chair in the kitchen. Neither Luther nor Sam were armed, and now Dewlap was in the process of being dehorned, as the Wells Fargo man reached out and lifted his six-shooter from its holster.

The detective's glance leveled on Luther Tuttle. "So this is a tickbird layout?"

"It's a lie!" cried the Hairpin Kid, who seemed on the point of launching himself at the detective.

"We kin explain everythin'," said Wattles.

"You're going to have a lot of it to do," Amos Riskin said. He stuck Dewlap's gun into his belt and pulled a shiny pair of handcuffs from his pocket, his glance shuttling from Dewlap to Wattles, whom he judged were likely to be the most troublesome. "Turn around."

An instant later they had been manacled together—old Wattles's right wrist to Dewlap's left.

"I'm sure they're not robbers," Ma Tuttle said. "They've worked for us for years."

"We're honest folks," said Luther.

Amos Riskin eyed the cowman coldly. "Funny, when you came to the door you called this man an owlhooter."

"I was only jokin'," Luther said.

"What I'd call the ole fool," rasped Wattles, "wouldn't be fitten in front of a lady."

"And *you*," the detective reminded Wattles, "wanted to know if he had robbed any more stagecoaches."

Wattles winced as Amos Riskin turned to his erstwhile saddle pard and said, "Even you admitted those posters didn't lie, back there on the trail."

Wattles groaned and the Hairpin Kid regarded Dewlap reproachfully.

"Thet war Big Bender whiskey talkin'," rumbled Dewlap, "yuh damn hoss-thief."

There was the brisk run of hoofs on the road from town and a few minutes later Jake Stoll and a deputy reined up by the group in front of the ranchhouse. The grizzled old sheriff nodded at Luther and Ma; then regarded Amos Riskin with some puzzlement.

"What's all this?"

The detective explained that, along with Dewlap's practical admission earlier that they were the men identified by the posters, further incriminating evidence had accumulated since his arrival at the Lazy Cross. "They're the Texas Hellions, all right. Sheriff.

Jake Stoll shook his head. "There's something stinkin' some place."

Not half an hour after Amos Riskin and old Dewlap had taken their departure from Big Spur, Sergeant Jim Tasker had ridden into town with word that a report reaching him from Ranger headquarters indicated horsemen answering the description of the Three Hellions in the vicinity of Hat Creek, to the north.

Hat Creek was on the railroad, and the telegraph operator had seen the trio a number of times in the past week. Jim Tasker was on his way to investigate, feeling that these might be the real outlaws.

The Ranger had pointed out that the riders encountered on the Las Trampas grade had made no attempt to loot the stage, but had seemed solely concerned with getting away. More, they had paid for their meal and the grain for their horses at the stage station, which was contrary to the usual tactics of the desperadoes that had been terrorizing the country.

When Jake Stoll had mentioned that old Dewlap and Amos Riskin had just left, Jim Tasker had suggested that it might be well to arrest and hold the Lazy Cross riders until things had cleared up. "There's too many hellions in Texas," he had concluded.

The sheriff dismounted. "Keep your eye on those old badgers," he told the deputy. "I want to have a few words with Riskin."

Jake Stoll and the Wells Fargo man held a whispered conversation, at the conclusion of which the sheriff announced his intention of returning Dewlap, Wattles and the Hairpin Kid to Big Spur.

"I hate to do this, Luther," the sheriff said, "because it's goin' to make talk, but it can't be avoided." He added, "I can't for the life of me see why you have stuck by these old hellions all these years."

"I'll tell ye why, Jake Stoll!" cried the cowman. "It's because they have stuck by me when trouble come to the Lazy Cross. I know the talk that's been goin' around—about bein' a tickbird—but I'm standin' on my rights to defend my boys from hell to breakfast. I warn ye, if it's in my power to help them, I'll do it."

"You're askin' for trouble," said the sheriff.

"Ma an' I have got trouble," Luther said grimly. "We're just one jump ahead of being' a poverty spread, an' these boys came back to help with the round-up, knowin' that when I ship my beef stuff there'll be barely enough to pay my bills an' what I owe at the bank, let alone try to scrape up enough for wages."

"This is home to me," said the Hairpin Kid, "an' I don't want no pay."

"Me nuther," growled Dewlap.

"Ey-up," said Wattles. "We knowed Luther would be a-needin' us an' we come a-lope."

"Guess you hombres made enough robbin' trains so yuh don't have to work for wages," sneered the deputy.

"Ye git down off thet hoss," yelled Wattles, "an' I'll cuff ye to a peak an' knock th' peak off."

Jake Stoll said, "Gear up a couple of hosses, Luther. The quicker I get these hombres in jail the safer it's goin' to be for all concerned."

"Don't me an' Shorty git to eat?" demanded Dewlap.

"You'll get to eat all right," growled the sheriff, "but it will be in a cell."

"I'll see that ye get a snack," said Ma Tuttle. By the time Luther and Sad Sam had geared the horses she had fixed up a wallet of grub. "Put it in the saddle pocket," she told Sam.

"I wouldn't trust you old tomcats as far as I could throw a stump-tailed bull," said

Jake Stoll. "I'm warnin' you—don't try anything."

"I knowed the minut' we turnt ye loose, ye scurrilous ole varmint," Wattles yapped at Dewlap, "ye'd git in a rayfus."

"She's a wicked world," gloomed Dewlap. "Me, I complete repent."

"Take the bracelets off," the sheriff told Amos Riskin, "we'll hobble 'em when they're in the saddle."

The detective holstered his six-shooter and fumbled for the key to the handcuffs—was still searching his pocket when Dewlap and Wattles converged on him.

A long time ago badge-toters had learned to their sorrow that they could not long remain with impunity in the vicinity of old Dewlap and Wattles when they were in a tight. This the doughty little Wells Fargo man discovered now, as the earth shook and the heavens fell.

IT WAS a simple maneuver but the results were devastating. Dewlap and Wattles suddenly converged on the detective, their manacled hands starting a great circle that built up a wicked momentum. Too late Jake Stoll bellowed a warning.

Amos Riskin had no time to protect himself and the upswing of the chain that joined the handcuffs caught him under the chin, fairly lifting him off his feet. Flung hard onto his back, the breath was jarred out of him.

Immediately the yellow carpet of light from the open door was heavily traveled with plunging horses and warring humans. The deputy jerked out his six-shooter and Sad Sam jabbed a thumb in the belly of his horse and yowled. The bronc jackknifed and the badge-toter lost his gun and his stirrups on the first pitch and was thrown on the second.

Jake Stoll came in swinging his pistol barrel, but the Hairpin Kid cut him down with a flying tackle. Dewlap and Wattles became entangled with the cursing deputy, and old Dewlap chopped a punch at him with his free right hand. Wattles, moving away, was jerked off balance when his pardner stopped.

"Run with me!" screeched Wattles.

"I'll run with any son-of-a-biscuit!" wheezed Dewlap.

Luther yelled at them and they rocketed toward him. The cowman was holding one of the horses that had just been geared. Dewlap, first in the saddle, half dragged Wattles up in front of him, with Luther lending a hand.

Sad Sam squalled at the Kid and Hairpin fought free of Jake Stoll, to find the old wrangler at his side with the second Lazy Cross horse. The Kid hit the saddle and spun the bronc around, grabbing at the dragging reins of the sheriff's horse and kiting the animal into a run.

Luther Tuttle and Sad Sam spooked the remaining three horses by waving their arms and yelling, thus forestalling pursuit until the fugitives were safely lost in the blackness.

A mile from the ranchhouse the three hellions slithered their mounts down the steep sides of a familiar *barranco* and reined up to take stock of the situation.

"Wall, here we go ag'in," said Dewlap almost cheerfully.

Wattles, the breath nearly jolted out of him from lying belly down in front of the saddle, slid to earth full of lament. "It ain't enough t' be on the owlhoot," he croaked, "but I got t' be handcuffed to you, ye damn ole catawampus."

"This is goin' ta make it tough on Ma an' Luther," the Hairpin Kid said forlornly. "Folks will say the Lazy Cross is a tickbird layout for sure."

There was a saddle gun in the boot of Jake Stoll's horse, and the Kid discovered that Sad Sam had tied his old S. A. Colt to the front jockey of the Lazy Cross horse he rode. The saddle pocket, along with the wallet of grub Ma Tuttle had fixed up, contained a file, contributed by Luther when the animals had been geared, back there by the saddle room.

Hairpin began to file through the links of the handcuffs, his heart in his throat. "We can't never go back now," he choked. He was seeing the tears streaming down Ma Tuttle's weathered cheeks when she had welcomed them.

"Whar we headin' now?" said Dewlap.

"I dunno," old Wattles said dolefully, "but it had better be a fur poke."

They mounted up and rode on. The Hairpin Kid's heart was heavy; Dewlap and Wattles were gloomily silent. Low stars roofed the world of what had been a great cattle kingdom—countless campfires in the sky, with ghost riders circling the last bed-

ground of Texas steers long since gone up the trail.

In the dark hour before dawn the three hellions came to the Lost Man Breaks, the hoofs of their horses softly nicking the stillness. Yonder, on the creek, was the old Lazy Cross line camp. Here they would rest a little before saying adios to the range they loved.

They reined up in a gap in the rimrock. Somewhere a coyote howled. A steer bawled in the distance. The Hairpin Kid suddenly tightened up, his ears straining against the heavy undercurrent of silence. Dewlap and Wattles caught it then—the faint murmur of voices coming from the dark shape of the old line shack.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Gun-Branded

SERGEANT JIM TASKER had arrived at Hat Creek the morning following his conversation with Jake Stoll in Big Spur, to find the town buzzing with excitement. In the early evening of the night before a westbound train had been stopped and looted a few miles to the east.

The Ranger got the full story from the telegraph operator at the station. A member of the train crew and the Wells Fargo express messenger had been killed. There had been three outlaws—two old ones and a kid, indicating that they were the dread Texas Hellions.

After dispatching a message to Jake Stoll at Big Spur, Jim Tasker had geared a fresh horse at the Hat Creek livery barn and ridden to the scene of the holdup. Here he picked up the trail of the train robbers, following it south toward the Lost Man country.

Night found the Ranger on the border of the breaks. The desperadoes were hours ahead of him and would have gained more time while he was stalemated, waiting for daylight. Jim Tasker remembered that, following the Big Spur bank robbery, the outlaws had secured fresh horses at the Lazy Cross and headed for the Lost Man badlands. He had spent days searching the endless miles of boisterous roughs, with their rimrock ridges and winding canyons and cul-de-sacs, after the trail had been lost. Somewhere here they had established a hideout, without doubt, but to find it was another matter.

Jim Tasker rode on into the breaks and so came to the upper reaches of Lost Man Creek. He then followed the winding course of the stream bed down toward the old Lazy Cross line camp, thinking to find a grub cache there. Too, he reflected, the shack would offer shelter for the night. . . .

* * *

Dewlap, Wattles and the Hairpin Kid listened for a long time to the occasional spatter of talk that reached them from the line camp beyond, thinking that perhaps it might be cowpunchers. Still, riders astir at this hour would have a fire going. Hairpin remembered the stolen chuck.

"Mebbe it's the hombres that cleaned out Luther's grub cache," he whispered to Wattles.

"I'm a-goin' to Injun up an' have a look-see," old Wattles said, low-toned.

He eased out of the saddle and moved cautiously toward the shack. Dewlap pulled Jake Stoll's carbine from the boot. "Mought be owlhooters," he opined hoarsely. "The ones that has been infringin' on us."

Wattles had covered half the one hundred yards to the shack when the voices quit. He heard then the creak of saddle leather and a moment later the dim shapes of three horsemen took form, moving away in the blackness.

There was then only the thin murmur of the creek and the fading *clip-clop* of the mysterious riders.

The bright campfires in the sky dimmed out and daylight spread across the breaks.

Dewlap, Wattles and the Hairpin Kid loosened the cinches of their mounts, watering the horses at the creek. They ate the grub that Ma Tuttle had fixed and discussed the situation. Jake Stoll, they reasoned, would return to Big Spur and organize a posse, which meant that the lawmen, picking up their trail at the Lazy Cross, were likely to reach the Lost Man country some time after noon. The old sheriff was an expert tracker and would "slide the groove," which meant, with fresh tracks to guide them, would follow the sign of the fugitives at a fast pace.

"When them jaspers git here," said old Wattles wisely, "they'll cut th' sign of them

ohmbrays what jist drug if we lay low."

"Likely won't notice th' hoof-marks is different fer a spell," said Dewlap.

"We could ride up the crick," said Hairpin, "an' hide in them sandstone caves under the rims."

They let their horses graze for a time; then tightened the cinches and rode slowly along the stony water course, effectively covering their tracks.

There was more than the fact that the sandstone caves a quarter-of-a-mile upstream offered a temporary hideout; more than satisfaction at thus tricking the man-hunters, for now the two old sin-twisters and the Kid would gain a little more time to remain on the range of the Lazy Cross, where long ago their hearts had taken root.

Now and then they saw a steer with the old familiar Lazy Cross iron, another reminder that they were cutting their last ties. They wouldn't be cruising for cattle in the breaks for Luther Tuttle this fall; perhaps never again.

The sun wheeled across the sky. The thin-trickling creek sang a low, sad song in the vast silence of the hills. Mid-day came, and afternoon. Then shadows were haunting the rims. Twilight deepened. During the daylight hours one of the fugitives was always on guard in the brush that grew rank across the mouth of the room-size cavern in the sand-rock while the others slept. Cattle came to drink at the creek and graze on the flat by the line camp below, a coyote skulked about the shack but Jake Stoll and his possemen did not come.

" 'Low ole Jake ain't the man-tracker he used t' be," said Dewlap.

"Suthin' queer," said Wattles.

And then it was night again. Bats and nighthawks were on the wing and the Big Dipper was starting its swing around the celestial range.

Dewlap, Wattles and the Kid waited for a time, their ears strained against the weight of silence. Rangemen's sixth sense seemed to whisper of some danger abroad.

"I thought I herd suthin'," said Dewlap.

"Owlhooters git thet-away," said Wattles, "an' then they start a-talkin' to th' crickets."

They instinctively found themselves moving with caution when they led their horses down from the base of the sand-rock cliff. Arriving at the creek they debated whether to ride up-stream, which would take them over the Lost Man Divide and into the Hat Creek country, or to turn east and follow along the northern fringe of the breaks.

"Le's go back past the line camp," said Hairpin, "an'—an' kinda make believe Luther an' Sad Sam is a-waitin' there." His words trailed off.

"Why, shore, button." Old Wattles knew how it was with the Kid. In the old days when he had been about "fryin' size" he had spent a lot of time at the line shack. It had been his schoolhouse and his castle—a place where a button learned the things a cowboy must know of range lore and cow brutes, and built his daydreams.

They drew rein where the brush thickets quit at the foot of the slope. There was the chance that law-riders had moved in since dark. The line shack was a dim shape against the hill at the far edge of the flat. There was no movement there, no sound, but one of the horses suddenly threw up its head, pointing its ears toward a chaparral clump near the pole corral.

"Likely a kioty," said Wattles.

They set their horses forward at last.

* * *

A little over a mile away up Lost Man Creek, Jim Tasker came slowly down toward the line camp. Suddenly a report reached him and he reined up. He heard it again then—a pistol shot, somewhere in the blackness in the direction of the old Lazy Cross line shack. . . .

DEWLAP, Wattles and the Hairpin Kid had reached a point not forty yards from the line camp when the bright bloom of muzzle flame and a snarling bullet struck at them from the deep shadow beside the shack.

A second shot knocked Wattles' horse down; a third slapped hard against the pommel of the Kid's saddle. Wattles was thrown clear. Dewlap and Hairpin flung themselves from their mounts and flattened to earth, certain that they had ridden into a man-hunter's trap.

When his horse had quit kicking, Wattles crawled forward and pulled the saddle-gun from its scabbard under the stirrup-

leather. The Kid jerked Sad Sam's six-shooter from the waistband of his pants.

Bullets continued to pour from the guns beyond, screaming over them, kicking up vicious dust spurts. Wattles and the Kid held their fire. There were five cartridges in Sad Sam's Colt, the Kid knew; it was all the ammunition he had. Wattles had only the shells that were in the magazine of the carbine—the saddle-gun that had been on the sheriff's horse. Old Dewlap was unarmed.

This was what a feller had to expect when he rode the owlhoot, the Kid thought bitterly. Wattles was a-rumble with oaths. The law was the law, but a bushwhack was dirty business. At least, the badge-toters—he was sure it was part of the posse—could have called a warning before opening fire. Didn't seem as though a fair man like Jake Stoll would play this sort of a game. Still, remembering what had happened at the Lazy Cross, the sheriff wasn't of a mind to be foxed again.

Dewlap, conscience-stricken at having been the cause of it all, spoke to Wattles, a little to his right, low-toned. "I got an ijee. Ye an' Hairpin draw their fire while I Injun past th' c'ral an' come in behint 'em."

"Ye ain't gointa do no sich thing," hissed Wattles. "All ye got is a knife, ye old hootnanny." He pitched a shot at a pistol flash, and three quick flashes struck back. "Three of 'em, looks like," he muttered. "Hell, mebbe it's them ohmbrays thet war here this mornin'."

The Kid crawled to side Wattles behind the dead horse.

"We gotta make our bullets count, button," Wattles said. "When I give th' word, throw in a shot t' draw their fire; I'll target on one of the flashes. He spoke softly to Dewlap but there was no answer, and he saw then that his pardner was crawling away. He swallowed hard. They had been in a lot of tights, but this looked like the Big *Jornado*.

There was movement by the shack and the Kid's six-shooter blasted. Fire streaked the blackness from both the front and rear of the building now, indicating that the gunmen had divided their forces. Wattles cut loose a shot but sensed that it had been wasted.

The Kid's sharp eyes made out horses behind the old corral and he said. "Them hombres have been shootin' with sixguns. Likely they got carbines on them cayuses."

"They start usin' .30-30s," said Wattles somberly, "an' she's a-gointa be tough fer sartin, 'specially is some on 'em git behint us."

"We could crawl back to the crick," said Hairpin, "but we can't pull off without Dewlap."

Old Wattles calculated the distance to the shack, wondering if their chances would be better if they rushed it. Kinda had allus figgered to go out in a hell-roarin' jamboree with his gun a-foggin'. Still, there was Hairpin. When a ole cuss was a-gittin' on up th' trail things didn't matter so much, but the Kid had a lot o' livin' yet.

"Lay in another one, button."

The Kid fired and guns roared angrily in reply. Their enemies were shooting from behind the corners of the shack now, Wattles saw, and in a position to drag the fight out indefinitely. It didn't look good.

"Look, button," said Wattles, "if them ohmbrays is lawmen we're whupped, any way ye look at it. Why don't ye pull out an' let me an' Dewlap finish this leetle rayfus."

"We're pards, ain't we?" the Kid said angrily. "I'm a-ridin' 'er out."

Wattles sighed. "I thought we fetched ye up to mind yore betters."

"I'm a man now."

"Drat a sprout when he gits ha'r on his chest," said old Wattles resignedly.

SUDDENLY there was a commotion behind the corral, accompanied by a high-pitched yowl. Dewlap was creeping stealthily up past the black-thorn thicket. In the starlight he made out the butt of a saddle-gun, standing in its boot on the nearer of the horses, which were tied to a pole of the corral. He had cuddled his bony shanks under him; then flung himself forward, managing to yank a Winchester from the scabbard before the spooked animal had jerked free.

A shadowy figure rushed past the corner of the corral and Dewlap drove home a bullet. The man caught at one of the poles, coughing soggily; then slipped to the ground.

"Come on, ye murderin' son!" squalled

Dewlap. "Hell ain't ha'f full uh skunks."

Old Wattles surged to his feet with a bugling shout. "Le's go, button!"

"Dewlap Injunned up on 'em while we was drawin' their fire," the Kid cried exultantly. "He must got hold of a saddle-gun."

Yellow lances turned now in the direction of the corral, and bullets cut their hot swaths around Dewlap.

The Hairpin Kid outdistanced Wattles and flung around a corner of the line shack, his six-shooter vomiting fire. A figure there half turned, his sixgun aflame, and a slug tore savagely at the Kid's vest. The next moment the man's knees buckled and he sprawled forward.

The third of the killer trio faced toward Wattles coming up in an awkward run. The carbine in the old cowpoke's hand spat once and a furious oath became a dying whisper in the final court of Judge Winchester.

"Paunched him!" cried Dewlap, coming on past the corral.

A sandstone cliff caught the last report and tossed the echo back, and once more there was silence in the slumbering hills.

"Yuh sure made up for that high lonesome," Hairpin said.

"Th' hell he has!" croaked Wattles. "If these *orejanas* are badge-toters we're as good as hung."

"Anyhow," said Dewlap, "it's the fust time sinst we got back t' Texas that a lawman ain't a-been shovin' his snoot in our leetle private powwows."

Suddenly Wattles stiffened. A horseman had emerged from the gloom, drawing rein a few yards away. Dewlap whirled. Even in the night there was no mistaking that flat-crowned hat, for it was the same hat that had showed over the rumps of the wheelers on the stage back on the Las Trampas grade.

"My old friends, the Texas hellions, I do believe," said Ranger Jim Tasker.

Wattles uttered a resigned groan. "Jist bury me in Texas."

"And who are these gents?" asked Jim Tasker, his eyes on the sprawled shapes of the dead men.

"I dunno," said old Dewlap lugubriously, "but they done went out a-hellin'."

"So I judge," said the Ranger. He went on slowly. "A train was stuck up east of Hat Creek early last night and two men murdered. I trailed the outlaws into the breaks. It looks bad."

"Last night?" cried Hairpin. "Look, mister, we was at the Lazy Cross early last night."

"Shorely," said Wattles. "Ye kin ask Luther Tuttle."

"A tickbird's word is no good," said the Ranger.

"Luther ain't no tickbird!" the Kid flung out, then gritted, "If yuh'll git off that hoss I'll bust ye one fer sayin' he is."

"Jake Stoll an' a Wells Fargo jasper war thar," put in Wattles. He waved his right hand at Jim Tasker, rattling the bit of chain on the handcuff.

"We done foxed 'em an' light out," said Dewlap, his tone reflecting pride of accomplishment.

"I can believe that," said the Ranger grimly. He then ordered them to drop their guns. "We'll have a look around."

The flame of flickering matches revealed that two of the dead men were tough-looking oldsters; the third was a hard-bitten youth about Hairpin's age.

"We come junin' along 'bout daybreak," explained Wattles, "an' done hear some wahoos throwin' talk. Directly, three gents come out of th' shack an' hit fer the rimrock."

"Bein' what yuh might term modest an' retirin' by natoor," said Dewlap, "we den up with the hoot-owls, figgering to migrate some come dark."

"These hombres opened up on us," the Hairpin Kid said, "when we rode toward the shack."


## SLAUGHTER IN SONORA!

**Walt Coburn's roaring, double-action novel of wet-cattle runners takes you below the Mexican line in next month's big 130-page issue of *Star Western* Magazine! You'll find also full-blooded stories by Philip Ketchum, Harry F. Olmsted, Giff Cheshire and others. Don't miss August *Star*—on sale July 11!**

"Likely figgered we was badge-toters," Dewlap said.

"She war nip an' tucker fer a spell," said Wattles, "but we final abolish 'em."

"From what I heard at Two Gun and Spanish Bend," said Sergeant Tasker, "and remembering the little affair on the Las Trampas grade, I'd say you birds were good at wrecking things in general."

"Me an' Shorty practical reduce Spanish Bend to a ruin," bragged Dewlap.

"And who the hell is Shorty?" demanded Jim Tasker.

"Him?" said Dewlap. "Oh, he's head shotgun fer Wells Fargo. Shore is a heller when he gits on a toot."

"Seems like Jake Stoll said something about you two wrecking a saloon and stealing a couple horses," Tasker said.

THE old Lazy Cross line shack revealed secrets that firmly established the three dead men as the long-sought outlaws. A freshly excavated hole in the dirt floor near the back wall contained a dozen or so canvas money sacks, heavy with gold coin, the loot stolen from the safe of the Wells Fargo express car the night before.

"They must have cached it here early this morning," said Jim Tasker, "on their way to a hideout in the rimrock; then returned tonight to perhaps count their spoils. From the looks of things, they had just uncovered the money sacks when the lookout saw you fellers riding up."

"Funny," Hairpin said, "they didn't take the stuff to their hideout."

"They were pretty smart," said Jim Tasker, "the way I look at it. For one thing, they wanted to get rid of their booty before daylight. In the next place, they had to hide these money sacks some place where one or more of them could return for it without arousing suspicion. They knew expert trailers would be running their sign and that this Lost Man country would be under the eye of law riders for a long time. There was the chance that their hideout might be discovered, which would mean that they could not safely come back for the gold."

"Shorely," said old Wattles, "but plenty range drifters spend the night here at the line camp."

"Right," said Tasker. "The money could have been removed a little at a time, if it suited their purpose, by one of the robbers passing himself off as a saddle-tramp."

Hairpin told about the missing grub that Luther Tuttle had hauled out a week before. "Reckon the outlaws took it to their hideout."

Jim Tasker explained that he had sent a message to the sheriff at Big Spur, reporting the holdup, early that morning. "I expect he and Riskin reached Hat Creek this afternoon with a posse and are camped somewhere north of the Lost Man Divide right now, waiting for daylight to follow the trail into the breaks. We'll probably meet them on the way out in the morning."

"So that's how come ole Jake didn't run our sign?" said Wattles.

"What's more," the Ranger said, "he had a pretty good idea that you birds wa'n't the men we were after. The plan was to arrest and hold you until we could figure out who the real hellions were."

"Wa'al," said Dewlap gloomily, "if Jake wa'n't sore on us before, he'll shore be pizen now."

The Kid told what had happened at the Lazy Cross, and Jim Tasker chuckled. "Hellions by name and hellions by nature."

They covered the dead outlaws with a piece of tarp; then caught and off-saddled the horses and put them in the corral. The Ranger had some grub in his saddlebag and he shared it with Dewlap, Wattles and the Hairpin Kid.

A fire was kindled in front of the line shack and they hunkered around it for a time before turning in.

"Gee!" Hairpin said, his face alight, "just think, in a few days we'll be workin' cattle on Lost Man ag'in."

"You fellows will have a nice bit of money coming," Jim Tasker said. "Two thousand dollars."

"'Tain't ourn," said the Kid. "It belongs to Luther."

The Ranger frowned. "I don't understand. You've earned the reward."

"Don't ye sabe we're a-ridin' fer th' Lazy Cross, amigo?" growled old Wattles truculently.

"Ey-up," drawled Dewlap. "An' any critters we slap our brand on"—pointing with his chin toward the dead men under the trap—"we done tally fer th' home iron."

*(Please turn to page 129)*

# ★ The Branding Corral ★

## Conducted by Strawboss

AN HOMBRE from the Far Western state of Connecticut opens this month's fat-chawin' jamboree in the *Corral* with a proddy remark about how much our high school buttons of today know about United States history and such. Frank C. Metrusky, of East Port Chester, Conn., has a few interesting things to say, pards—but please remember that this here *Corral* is a sort of town meetin' house where each and every man has a right to have his say. Come in, Brother Frank!

Dear Strawboss:

Battle cries and political catch phrases have always been my special meat because of the intense human interest that can be found behind their origins. Your *Branding Corral* seems to me to be elastic as hell as to what goes into it so long as it concerns Americans in some way. I'm scribbling this letter in the hope that it might be printed, and seen and read by a few high school kids, the majority of whom don't seem to know a damned thing about the history of their own or any other country these days.

"Remember Goliad!" was what the Texans yelled at the Battle of San Jacinto. Well, why yell that? Well, the thing goes back to the town of Goliad, in what was once Mexico but is now part of Texas. Goliad was a ghastly reminder to the Texans fighting for their independence of what would happen to them should they lose to the Mexicans at San Jacinto.

Colonel James W. Fannin, Jr., fought a retreating action against a greatly superior force under Mexican General Urrea between Goliad and the town of Victoria. Fannin, his little army and their ox-cart wagon-train of supplies, were overtaken in a fog by Urrea on March 18, 1836. Fannin shifted his luggage, carts and oxen into the form of a square and waited for the coming Mexican assault. Urrea let go with infantry and dragoons at the same time. Fannin's men stopped them cold—and continued to stop them until night came. Then the water began to fail and the nearly sixty wounded Texans experienced the tortures of hell. Urrea was reinforced at dawn, bringing his total troops to 1,000 against Fannin's nearly 275. There was no way out and Fannin, wounded, surrendered as the Mexican attack got under way once more. Now comes the dirty part—the part the Texas soldiers at San Jacinto remembered.

Fannin and his men were taken to the presidio at nearby Goliad and clapped into jail along with about 175 other Texans from various captured bands. On March 27, those men able to walk, with the exception of men having medical knowledge who were needed to care for the Mexican wounded, were marched from the presidio in three columns. Many Texans imagined they were being taken out to work in the fields. Others thought they were to be released and sent to the United States. Two thousand yards from the presidio at Goliad the Mexican guards turned suddenly and began firing. Several Texans escaped in the confusion that followed. A few, badly wounded, were spared their lives because of the frantic pleas of a Mexican woman. The Mexicans killed more than three hundred men that day, including Fannin who, too badly injured to walk, was hauled back to Goliad and shot through the back of the head.

The Mexican officer commanding at Goliad then ordered the dead stripped of their clothing and the bodies thrown into a heap and burned. This burning was only partially accomplished. Months later the charred and maimed remains were gathered together and buried in a common grave. That's what originated the San Jacinto battle cry: "Remember Goliad!"

*A Buck's a Buck!*

There was more than one way to turn a dollar on dead men in the Old West besides claiming bounty money on their hides,

*(Please turn to page 130)*

# ANY NECK TO FEED A NOOSE!

## A Boom-Town Novel

### CHAPTER ONE

#### A Brother to Kill?

HIS door slammed open. Delia stood there, her face flushed with the cold, her eyes bright with alarm. She shot a look back out of the door and closed it.

"Williams is getting up a posse, Deuce."

He laid his loaded rifle across the table. "Let 'em come. I'm not running. If they try to mob me, I'll be ready for 'em, whatever they do." He left the table and took her coat. "Your father know you're here?"

She shook her head and sat down in the chair before the red-hot iron stove, her face despondent.

"Williams," he said contemptuously. "I always thought he was crooked. Where'd he come from? A smooth talker, a fast worker. And crooked as hell. I know. I've been there myself."

She shook her head wearily. "It's no use, Deuce. Even if it were true, you couldn't prove anything."

The blood was thick in his head. "He's the one that's framing me."

"He's only against you because he loves me," she said in a tired voice. "Why shouldn't he be angry? He's lost more money from the robberies than anyone else."

"His money? The gold and stuff he ships out?" He swung away from her and stood staring out of the window. "He may be robbing his own shipments off the stage, for all anybody knows, and framing me for it."

She laughed shortly and got up. "You're dreaming, Deuce. He never leaves town. How could he rob himself? And everybody knows Lew Logan's your brother, so why shouldn't he say you're helping him rob the country?"

Glass crashed beyond the inner door. Deuce whirled. He strode to the door, yanked it open and looked into the gray gloom of the store. The empty counters stretched dark and dusty down to the dirty front windows. There was nobody there, or in the bleak, wind-blown street beyond.

The rifle crashed. Farrell's gun flew against the wall

**Deuce Logan grinned. "Don't look so worried, Delia," he said. "If they had the guts to lynch me, they'd be doing it, not threatening. It's just the two-bit bravos that hang around Gramp's saloon, egging themselves on. I ought to send Williams a letter of invitation to string me up. He'd love that—he'd even buy the rope himself!"**

He went past the cold stove to the pane with the big, jagged hole in it. Wind from the wintry street blew in, heavy with the feel of snow. The yellowed foreclosure and auction notice fluttered raggedly on the door.

He gingerly toed the stone that lay on the unswept floor. The note tied to the stone read: "Get out of town fast. One more robbery and you're through. If Farrell won't hang you, we will."

He smiled thinly, crumpled the note in his fist and flicked it away. "The lousy, two-bit fools!" he muttered.

He felt Delia at his shoulder, glanced at her and saw her startled eyes on the hole in the glass.

"Kid trick," he said. "Stones through windows with warnings on them. Like dirty-minded old women writing unsigned notes."

"It's coming," she said in a low voice. "You're a fool not to go while you've got a chance."

He looked at her and grinned into her eyes. "Don't look so worried, Delia. If they had the guts to lynch me, they'd be doing it, not threatening. It's just the punks that hang around Gramp's saloon, egging themselves on. I ought to send Williams the note. He'd love it. He'd buy them another drink, and furnish the ammunition."

She put her hands to her eyes wearily. "Deuce, why don't you leave? Leave for a while, anyway, until things settle down. Your brother can't keep on forever. The snow's coming; they can track him down then. He'll have to leave the country. Why don't you—"

"The hell with them!" he said. "Let them try something. I'm in the right, and I can fight."

"You promised, Deuce. When you hung up your guns and opened this store, you promised you were through."

"This store!" he jerked out bitterly. His eyes swept it with contempt. "Miners' supplies! Look at it. Empty. Dead. Do you know what's left of it? After Williams foreclosed? Seventeen candles and half a case of dynamite that the rats chewed. Three pick handles. Just enough to blow it to hell. And hell can have it. The whole thing stands for everything I tried. What chance did I have?"

ALL the pent-up anger and bitterness of the past two months rose in him. "The rotten rats, the rotten, dirty, self-righteous rats. With their nasty little suspicions, waiting for a chance to say I told you so! Waiting for something to happen so they could jump on a man's back and sink their rotten little teeth into him. Why don't you go on and marry Williams? He owns a bank. He's got lots of money. Why load yourself down with me? The hell with the store. The hell with—"

He heard her sob and the bitterness died with a groan. He hit himself in the mouth with the back of his wrist.

Her hand caught his fist. "Oh, please, Deuce, I know you don't mean it—please don't be so bitter. Everything we planned and hoped for—oh, darling, I don't mind failing, or hard luck, or anything, with you. But when you turn against yourself . . . You know Williams isn't anything to me. What if he is against you on account of me? He can't do anything as long as we're together!"

He held her against him. "I'm sorry. It's just that I don't know what to do."

"Leave. I'll come with you. I don't care what father says."

He shook his head. "They'd say it just proved everything, that I was still teamed up with Lew, fronting for him in the town, helping him, giving him information. Good God, just because he's my brother, and they can't get him, they have to pick on me!" He stood silent a moment. "Where could we go? No town would have me. I can't quit when I'm losing. I've got to stick, prove myself some way."

He stared woodenly out of the window. "I've got to do more than that. I've got to prove they're wrong." His voice was quieter. "It isn't enough to be innocent. You've got to prove it."

They stood together in the dark, gutted store, listening to the moan and sigh of wind. "Don't you see, darling?" he said. "Even if Lew took his gang out of Idaho, even if he were caught and hung, they'd still say I was guilty. I've got to do something to prove I've had nothing to do with him. By heaven, if it weren't for you I'd burn this town from end to end. But as it is . . ." He fell silent, and then finished in a dull, dead voice, "I've got to bring Lew in myself, kill him myself, hang him my-

self. And I can't. I just can't do that!"

"Why don't you do it?" she said quietly.

He stood dumb, staring at the bleak sky beyond the window. "My own brother?"

She drew herself out of his arms. "Deuce, I could say something mean. I could say you're choosing between him and me, but I know that isn't the way you feel. I know how you feel about him. But what is he? A murderer, a robber, a bandit. He's robbed four stages. How many people has his gang killed?"

He groaned. "I know that. But he's my brother, darling. You can't kill your own brother."

"But don't you see, that's why everybody's against you? You haven't even helped them! You know his tricks, you were with him once. Surely you could help father and the others track him down."

He turned away and stood leaning on the dusty counter, his head bowed.

"Sure, I can see I'm a fool. He's hated me ever since I quit him. That's why he's raiding this part of the country, to do me in. I ought to kill him for that." He pushed himself away from the counter. "But he's still my brother. The son of my mother. God, how could I do it? I'd rather he got me, than murder him. Worse than murder."

Outside, a horseman galloped down the street, the hoofs ringing on the frozen earth.

"It's the stage guard," she said, her voice tight. "There's blood on his face, Deuce."

He turned toward the window, feeling his stomach tighten. "He's done it again."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Gallows Choice

THEY heard the rattle of the tug-chains long before the stage passed the window, and the slow rattle of hoofs, the groan and squeak of wheels. It drew abreast, one of the wheel-horses missing. He could see the bullet holes in the leather sides. A woman sat in the driver's seat, holding the reins wrong and awkwardly. It creaked past, out of sight, dragging on toward the hotel.

"I guess that does it," he said. "They'll be up here in a few minutes. If they can't get him, they'll damn well get hold of me."

Her face was very pale in the dusk. "Please go, Deuce."

"You'd better get out of here, darling," he said. "I don't want your father finding you here. Not since he kicked me out."

He took her arm and led her back into his living room behind the store.

He looked up at his guns, hanging by their guards from two nails in the wall behind the stove.

"You'd better take them with you, Deuce. Write me where you'll be. I'll come and we'll get married." She smiled with pale lips. "I don't mind roughing it, Deuce. Not with you."

He grinned with his mouth. "I'm not running. I turned honest and I'm staying that way. God," he said, rubbing his forehead, "if it weren't for you I'd hit the hills for sure, I'm that fed up with— No, I'll fight it out, if I have to. Let them come."

She looked at the guns. "Then you're going to break your promise."

"No. Not yet. I'll find some way. Get going, darling. They'll be here any minute."

He shut the door after her and stood listening a moment. They'd be after him now, all the hatred and suspicion that had been damming up against him would break loose. Sheriff Farrell wouldn't be able to hold them. Williams would egg them on. Farrell had been a good friend once, had helped him along because of Delia. But that was gone, too, with the other friendships.

He looked out of the window at the mountains beyond the sage plain. Somewhere in those pine-shrouded ridges Lew and the others lay hidden. Perch Malone, Moose Hefflin. And Lew would be laughing at him now.

"Take care of him, Deuce," his mother had said. She'd whispered it as she lay in the washed-out horse blankets, her little thin, worked-out hands feeble on the edge, her eyes wandering on the ceiling as though still looking for the rescue she had long since despaired of. "He's only a baby, Deuce. He thinks he's big and smart, but he's only a baby. He'll need somebody some time. Take care of him for me."

With her cheeks falling in, and the hollows of her eyes deepening as he watched,

with her gray, wispy hair all dishevelled on the old pillow, with death creeping up from her knees and clouding the eyes that were already searching the ceiling for somewhere to go, even now, not a thought for the old man, or for him, or for herself. Only the baby boy out rousting around with the Henessey gang, while she lay dying.

So she had died, the tiny worn-out hands pinching the frayed edge of the horse-blanket as though there were some hope in that. And he had said, Yes, as a promise, to ease her and comfort her, she who had for so long pitifully spent her feebleness to ease and comfort them; the old hound of a father, Lew, the love of her heart, and himself, the only one she could depend on. Sure, he had said, giving his promise, and had watched her die with at least some peace, in some security, the tiny hand clinging to him.

Take care of him, Deuce.

AND he'd fought for the baby, got him out of two scrapes there in Albuquerque, and when he'd gone really outlaw, followed him into the back trails and joined his gang and taken his part in his fights, and his sarcasm and his taunts, trying to persuade him to settle down while he still had a chance.

He could see the smile now, as he stared out of the window, amused, full of contempt. See how long you last? the smile had said, you and your big ideas, your prig honesty.

And he should have seen it a month ago, when he'd gone up and tracked the gang down and told Lew about Delia Farrell and their happiness, and pleaded with him to quit the country, or give himself up and help capture the gang.

Nobody but old man Farrell had known about that visit, and the promise Lew had given to come down. It was to be secret, and safe. But Lew hadn't come down, or left the country, and slowly Deuce had realized that the promise had been a mockery, that the smile had been merely hidden.

Take care of him, Deuce.

He whirled away from the window, his face twisted with rage; he went to the wall and jerked his guns down. He stood there fumbling cartridges from the belt into the chambers, his brain and eyes clouded, and did not hear the door open, or see Williams step in with his pistol ready.

"Put it down, Logan," Williams said, his words hard and sharp as buckshot spilled on the floor.

Deuce's eyes cleared. He snapped the cylinder shut and faced Williams, holding the gun by his side. The same big, smiling face, open and rosy, in such a contrast to the small, shifting, secretive eyes. He looked past him, through the door. Four faces, pinched in the cold, and beyond them others. He recognized them. Men he had done business with, miners who had bought his supplies. Pat Boglin, Peter Moses, Jesse Hurdey. Not the saloon louts, these, but men, owners from the works up the valley.

"Where's Sheriff Farrell?" he asked.

"He's gone up to look at where the stage was robbed," Williams answered. "Put it up."

"That depends on what you aim to do," Deuce said.

"We're breaking no laws," Williams answered, his eyes and voice dead cold and level. "Not yet. Two men were killed this afternoon. A shipment of currency and bullion from my bank was taken. Money belonging to these men. Money I'm responsible for. The guard says he saw your brother."

"Go ahead."

"That wasn't a scheduled stage, Logan. Somebody knew it was going, and told your brother. Somebody in this town."

"Go ahead, Williams. So what?"

"We're giving you two choices. It's snowing in the mountains now. The snow'll be down here soon. He can't stay up there without a fire. He can't get out without leaving tracks. We'll be able to get him. We're starting out in an hour—at six. You're coming with us. You're going to call him out; he'll come to you, if he thinks you're alone."

"And suppose I don't?"

"That'll prove to us where you stand. And you'll hang. If not publicly, then in private."

"That sounds like your idea of a choice."

"You don't have to go. You can leave town in the next hour. If you do, that'll also prove where you stand, and you'll be outside the law."

Deuce took a long breath. "I see. If I don't murder my brother, I hang. If I

leave, I'll prove myself guilty and I'll be hunted down. You're cute, Williams. As cute as an icepick in somebody's back. All this proves to me is that you're the filthy pup I've always known you were—and that Delia thought you were."

Williams's breath sucked in sharply and his gun jerked up. His fat face was not so rosy; his little eyes were burning.

"The only reason why you've hatched all this up," Deuce went on evenly, "is because if you hanged me outright it would end your chances with her. That's the same reason why you don't shoot me where I stand. Plus the risk that I might kill you in the process."

Rage was fighting in Williams's face. His hand tightened convulsively on his pistol.

"If I'm a liar, Williams, go ahead and shoot."

The barb stung him into control. He lowered the gun and stood trembling. "You've still got your choice, Logan. You've got an hour to make it." He smiled, his teeth as sharp as a fox's. "I guess you're entitled to talk. I don't blame you. I probably would too, if I were as tight over the barrel as you are." He laughed shortly. "So long, until six. If you're still here, you'll come with us. With your feet tied under the horse, if we have to."

He slammed the door after him. Deuce listened to the faint rattle of bootheels as they went up the alley beside the store to the street.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Return of the Hunted

HIS right arm ached. He looked down, took hold of the barrel of his pistol and wrenched the gun out of his stiffened fingers.

He stood there unable to think. He was trapped. There was nothing he could do. His head felt as though it were full of wool and he barely heard the light rap on the door. His eyes turned toward it as she pushed in.

She stood in front of it, her eyes on the gun. "What did they want, Deuce?"

"You're right," he said. "I'll have to go after him myself, bring him in myself. My God, why didn't he surrender?"

He turned to the wall, got the belt and strapped it on, slipped the two guns into the holsters and got his mackinaw.

"Deuce, you're coming back all right?"

His fingers stopped on the second button. "I don't know. There's the whole gang. But if I don't, at least you'll know I tried."

She looked at his face sharply. There wasn't the right look in it, not the sharpness or conviction he should have had; rather, a sort of dull resignation.

"That's just it, Deuce," she said, backing against the door. "You're not really going to try. You're going up there because you think it's the right thing. You'll challenge him but you'll give him a break. Maybe you'll kill him, but not without giving him a chance to kill you—and if you give him a chance, he will."

His eyes cleared as he looked at her. "You're pretty sharp, aren't you? All I know is I've got to get him before Williams does, or I'll never clear myself."

He picked up the rifle and smoothed the oil on the receiver, not looking at her. "No, I'm not going to give him a break. I'm going to prove the truth, once and for all. I'll clean out that rotten bunch and bring him in alone."

He opened the door and stopped, his face freezing. "It's him!" he said. "Lew. He's hurt. The rotten rat, coming to me now."

The figure came on out of the sage, lurching slightly as though drunk, toward the door. He was holding his left arm in his right hand.

Fury rose in Deuce and the muzzle of his rifle came up. "Get back where you came from, you rotten liar," he said as the other came up, "or I'll shoot you dead where you stand."

Lew stood weaving slightly at the foot of the steps. His face was thin and drawn, his eyes dull and feverish, and he had a month's growth of beard.

"Deuce," he said weakly, "for God's sake, Deuce, let me in! It's the gang. They're after me. For God's sake, hide me. They've kept me prisoner for a month. I killed the guard this afternoon. They were out on a job. He shot me before I got away. Hide me."

Deuce looked down at him, his face twitching, his finger tight on the trigger.

Lew looked up, his face weary and sick,

pleading with terror in his eyes, his bent knees resting for support on the edge of the steps.

"I hide you and we hang together. Is that it? How much more do you want me to give up for you? You've got my neck in a rope now, you damn rat. I won't hide you. I'll turn you over to Williams." He turned to the girl. "Delia, go get Williams and tell him I've got Lew."

The terror burst free in Lew's face. "No, not him!" he cried. "He's the one! He found out you came up! He told the gang to keep me prisoner—Deuce, hurry up! they're coming! Don't let Williams know—"

His jaw sagged and his eyes closed, he bent forward and fell across the steps.

Deuce stood looking dumbfoundedly down at him. "Did you hear what he said, Delia?"

"We'd better get him out of sight quick, before Williams comes."

"I've got no place to hide him. Oh, God, I forgot the gang! He said they're following him. Quick, let's get him inside."

HE PICKED his brother up and took him in to the bed under the window. "Delia, there's only one thing to do. Ride for your father. Give me that whiskey on the shelf. I've got to wake him up long enough to get the rest of the story. I want you to hear it so you can tell him the truth about Williams."

He ripped his brother's shirt sleeve up to the shoulder, knotted it and bound the two halves tightly around his arm above the jagged wound in his elbow. The bullet had shattered the joint. The feeble spurt of blood stopped. He took the bottle from her hand and poured some into his mouth. Lew gagged, coughed and opened his eyes.

"What did you say about Williams?"

The haggard eyes cleared, and as memory came back with a shock he tried feebly to sit up. "Give me a gun, Deuce," he said feebly. "They'll be here any minute."

"Shut up!" Deuce stood the rifle at the head of the bed. "I'll put that there if it makes you feel any better. Delia, keep an eye out of that window and watch the pines." She stood behind him, gazing out over his head as he knelt by Lew.

"What's the story, Lew? Why didn't you come down? What about Williams?"

Lew lay slack, his voice little more than a whisper. "Listen! I wanted to come. I'm tired. I'm sick of it. But I had to work it out right. Listen, Deuce, I came to this country to make you eat dirt. Williams knew about us. He came to me. I was to rob for him, and he was to throw the blame on you. He hates your guts on account of some—I guess her," he said, gesturing toward Delia. "We both wanted the same thing, to get even with you. He ships money and gold out from his bank to Boise. I mean he's supposed to. It's all in his bank right now. He was going to sneak it out when the snow came and we had to quit.

"All I did was take the dummy boxes he shipped and burn them, and grab anything else I could get off the stage. I'd come in nights to get our cut from him, in the bank."

Deuce's eyes burned into his. "Are you lying, Lew? Is this some trick?"

"God, no!" the other moaned.

"Where is this loot? In the safe?"

"He's too smart for that. It's under the floor, under the safe. You roll the safe off a trap door. Deuce, I couldn't tell you when you came up. I was afraid you'd accuse him, and he'd out-fox you. I was going to come down alone and bust his lousy bank and turn the evidence over to the sheriff—all that money, and the deposit letters we were supposed to have swiped. It's all there. I've seen it, under the floor. Then he found out I was going to turn in—"

"Lord!" Deuce groaned. "Farrell must have told him."

Lew's teeth bared in a snarl. "I thought it was a secret."

"He didn't know about Williams. You can't blame him."

"That's fine. Fine. So Williams told the rest of them to keep me prisoner. They'd have killed me for the double-cross, but he said to save me for a goat when they quit, when the snow came. I've been up there starving for a month, under guard, waiting for a break. Where in hell's the blasted sheriff? Get me under cover before those wolves show up!"

DEUCE turned to Delia. "Get your father quick. He's up where the stage was robbed. Ride like hell, darling, and

tell him the truth." He looked at the clock. "Williams'll be here in twenty minutes. I'll have to hide Lew. He'll ride me out into the mountains at gunpoint; and if I go, the gang'll come and tear the place down to find Lew, and kill him. God knows what'll happen if they get here at the same time. All I can do is stall like hell. Hurry, darling!"

She nodded, pale, and went out. He stood up and looked across the bed through the window. The sage plain lay darkening, its far rim lost in shadow. Already the mountains were hidden by snow, only the foothills remaining dimly visible.

He turned out the lamp. Firelight from the stove joints ribboned dully across the walls.

"Listen, Lew, if the gang gets here first, we've got to fight them two to eight, and we won't have a chance, this dark. They'll burn the place over us. There's only one thing to do: take you to Williams now. The rest of his posse is honest. He won't dare to do anything. I'll surrender you. I'll tell Farrell privately about Williams, and we'll get the stuff out as evidence later." He paused, thinking. "We'll have to go now. He's due here in a few minutes. If he catches us in here, he'll say I was hiding you."

He went to the bed and took his brother's arm. "Come on, Lew. I'll help you walk." The arm was limp. He shook it. "Lew."

There was no answer. He bent low over the other's face. The jaw hung slack. The eyelids were half-shut, showing only the whites of his eyes. His breath was faint and shallow.

He picked him up, surprised at how light and thin he had become, managed him through the door and went down the steps.

He turned up into the alley and stopped as a tight group of riders turned down from the street, their figures black against the faint glow of early evening lights from the saloon beyond. The posse was early.

"Williams!" he called.

The horsemen drew up in front of him. "Yes," Williams said.

"Listen to this, all of you," Deuce said, talking past Williams to the others and making his voice strong. "Boglin! Hurdey! My brother has come in of his own free will and surrendered. He's willing to help us find the rest of the gang. He's wounded. I'm putting him under the protection of all of you until Farrell gets back. And I'm putting you on your honor to see that he's protected. Remember, he's got the names of the men you want. Have I got your word?"

"You've got mine," Williams said heavily. "You'd better take him back in."

Deuce drew a long breath of relief. At least he had help, when the gang showed up. Williams might be against him, but the others would guarantee a fight to protect Lew.

He turned back. Inside, he laid Lew back on the bed, relighted the lamp and turned as Williams came in.

"The gang's after him, Williams. Bring the rest of them in." He turned to the bed and straightened out Lew's arms more comfortably. Williams opened the door. The rest of the men filed through.

"What's the names of this gang?" somebody said.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Snow Trap

HE STRAIGHTENED up and turned, and froze to stone. Somebody laughed. The door was closed and two men leaned against it, their guns lined up with his stomach. Six more leaned against the walls.

"Hello, Deuce," one of them said in a soft, easy drawl, coming over to him. "You ain't changed much, have you?" He took his guns. Deuce looked at the big, spade-shaped jaw, the loose smile, and the small of his back turned to water. Moose Hefflin, who'd shoot a man to get the rust out of his guns.

"Hi, Deuce," another said cheerily. "Long time no see." Perch Malone, spry as ever. Perch went over to the bed and jabbed Lew's stomach with his gun. "Cold as a mackerel."

They were all there, smiling, looking friendly, a little shy, enjoying the joke.

He looked at Williams, and Williams grinned. "It's a slightly different posse, Logan, but we're still going to the hills."

"Where's Boglin and the rest?"

"They went home," Williams said, "after I postponed the hunt. Perch sneaked into town and told me Lew got away. Smart lad, Perch. Too smart to come straight

here without telling me. No, Logan, nobody's going to be around till tomorrow."

Deuce glanced toward the window. Something hit the glass and melted, then another. Snow. The first flakes. He set himself. He could stall a while, and fight a little longer. Long enough to give the snow a chance. None of the gang was facing the window. As long as they didn't see the snow, they wouldn't think of their danger.

"We'd better be going, boss," Perch said. "Your pals might take a notion to sneak back here anyway."

Williams frowned. "We'll go when I say to go. I want to figure what I'm going to tell the posse when we find the bodies in the hills tomorrow."

Perch's voice was a notch higher, and scratched with irritation. "Can't we decide that up in the hills?"

The snow was coming faster now. A little was settling in the corner of the window.

Deuce snorted a laugh at Williams. "Your best man's getting scared. You'd better run with them." He turned to Perch. "Or why run at all, Perchie? Why not knock over his bank while you've got a chance? The sheriff's out of town. Nobody's out in this cold. Four of you could hold down the gang in the saloon, and the rest could take over his savings. It's a cinch."

Williams jerked his gun and strode to him. "You've got too many ideas, Logan." He struck him across the mouth with the back of his hand. Deuce sucked blood from his lip and grinned past him at Perch.

"All you got to do is plug him here and take off. What're you going to do now, anyway? The snow's coming. You've got to quit. Why not clean him—"

This time the hand was a fist. Deuce staggered back against the store door. He held his nose with his hand. Blood ran down his forearm. He watched Williams staring at Perch. Perch looked quietly back, the beginning of a smile quirking the corners of his tight mouth.

"Don't hold that gun on me, Williams," Perch said. "It ain't polite. Also, it ain't safe. For you."

"You aren't getting any ideas, are you?" Williams said, pinching his words.

"As a matter of fact, it's a damn good idea. Except we want to work together next season."

"That's better," Williams said with a sigh. "Let's go."

Deuce looked at the window through eyes blurred with the pain of his nose. The snow should be deep enough now. Was it worth a beating to delay them any longer? He screwed up his courage.

"Except this season's the last, Perch. Williams's bank is supposed to be broke from robberies. He can't keep it open and look honest. He's got to skip."

Perch's light air vanished and his face sharpened. "Skip?"

"He's a liar," Williams said loudly.

PERCH grinned like a puppet, and the grin was gone, leaving a face like a skull. "Everybody's a liar. You too. Me too. That don't mean nothing. But what he says makes sense. You can't keep a bank open that's supposed—"

The stove popped and hissed and he broke off. "What's that?"

Again water hit the stove and hissed. All of them looked toward the red-hot top. Perch looked up at the stove-pipe ring in the roof.

"Just some water," Moose said.

"Water, hell," Perch said. "It's snow melting." He looked at the window and a long stream of curses ripped from his mouth. He whirled on Williams.

"You simple-minded damned fool! We're trapped!"

They both turned toward Deuce. "So that was your game—get us into a fight until the snow got deep enough to hold tracks."

Deuce smiled faintly. "Farrell's due back pretty soon. There's nothing he'd rather see than a flock of tracks headed for the hills. Nobody's going to the mountains, Williams. Nobody's leaving town, Perch."

They stared at him, their eyes adding up what he had said.

"You're trapped, the whole rotten flock of you. You can't shoot Lew and me here without raising the town. The only way you can get away safe is to break it up and leave separately." He watched them in silence. "And you can't bust the bank, Perch. Because you can't get away to-

gether, and you wouldn't have time to divide it all." He looked at Williams. "And that cooks your goose. I know about the stuff in your so-called bank. The evidence against you is right there, waiting for Farrell. And Farrell's coming here, and you can't kill him for the same reason you can't kill me. So you've got to run. Now ain't that a hell of a note?"

Williams laughed. "Perch, we've got to stick together, that's all. He had me going for a minute. All of you go over to the bank and hide there. I'll knock these two off and when Farrell gets here, I'll tell him I found Logan hiding his brother. Here's the key. Scatter your horses. Get the hell on your way!"

The gang began to draw toward the door. Williams laughed. "How's that, Logan? How's Farrell going to know about your evidence now?"

Deuce smiled woodenly back. "Because Delia knows. She's already told her father. You could kill him. But you won't kill her. You'd better just skip town, Williams, and forget about murdering me and my brother Lew."

Williams looked sideways at Perch and smiled. "He's fighting hard, isn't he? If you and I just split that evidence, there won't be any, will there?"

Perch smiled back at him. "That sounds good for everybody." He looked at Deuce and smirked. "So long, cowboy. Take care of him, Williams." He went over to the bed and spat in Lew's face. "Try to wake him up before you knock him off—if he ain't dead now. I'd hate to have him die and him not know it, the rotten rat."

He slammed out of the door.

Looking into Williams's eyes, Deuce listened to the scramble of their horses racketing up the alley. They'd go to the bank and wait for Williams.

"They'll probably kill you when you get there," he said.

Williams shook his head, smiling. "They're probably figuring to. So I'm rounding up the posse, after I kill you. We'll surround the bank and slaughter the whole lousy crew. It'll look like a red-handed catch. I get the credit, and before Delia can talk about any evidence, I clean it out. She'll probably decide it was a lot of lies after awhile. So long, you damned fool."

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Proof for the Damned

HOOFS sounded in the alley. Williams tensed. "Don't look hopeful, Logan. Suppose it is Farrell." He raised the gun.

"Over your head," Lew said weakly. "Higher." Deuce looked toward the bed. The rifle he had left at its head was lying across Lew's knees. He could see Lew's arm trembling, but there was nothing weak about his jaw.

"Up, or you're dead."

Williams's face paled. He raised his gun slowly into the air.

Outside, Delia's voice called Deuce's name. He heard Farrell's heavy tread on the steps. He reached up and twisted the gun out of Williams's hand, covered him.

The door swung open.

"What's this?" Farrell rumbled, looking at Deuce and Williams.

"Watch out, Farrell!" Williams shouted.

Farrell ducked and drew at the same time.

"Drop it!" Lew cried, covering Farrell from the side.

"They're traitors, Farrell!" Williams shouted. "Their gang's over at the bank now, robbing it!"

Fury stung Deuce. "He's a damned liar, Sheriff. Don't believe him."

"Put down that gun, Logan," Farrell rumbled, ignoring Lew's rifle. "I don't know who's lying, but put down the gun."

Desperation seized Deuce. He could prove nothing against Williams, and Farrell wouldn't believe the story.

"Drop that gun," Lew panted, "or by God—"

"Lew," Deuce shouted, "don't kill him!"

"They'll never believe us, Deuce," Lew said. "Save yourself."

The rifle crashed. Farrell's gun flew against the wall. He stood holding his numbed hand.

"Get out, Deuce," Lew panted desperately. "I can't lever the damn thing again. Get out and get that damned proof."

Faint voices, shouting with alarm at the shot, sounded down the alley from the street.

Deuce backed away from Williams. He could see Delia standing outside, her face taut with fear.

"Let him go, Sheriff," Williams said. "They were hiding here. I caught them and they tricked me. Their gang's robbing the bank now. Let him go and we'll get him later. Don't try to stop him."

"Delia told me some story about your being head of the gang," Farrell said. "I told her it was a lie."

Deuce looked at Williams, contempt twisting his face. "I'm going to prove that lie right now, Sheriff." He turned to the door. "It was no lie, Delia. By God, the next time you see me I'll be cleared, or I'll be dead."

Feet were coming down the alley, the questioning voices were louder. He skirted around Williams and took the rifle from Lew, went over to Farrell and took his other gun, jammed it into his belt. He waved to Delia outside, slammed the door and locked it as men ran into the yard. He ran to the store door.

"Farrell!" he heard Williams cry as he dodged through, "He's going to rob the bank! We've got to—" He slammed and locked the door.

A peculiar joy sang in his head as he ran through the dark for the front door. Lew had swung over. He hadn't killed Farrell, when he could have. If he could only get the proof, clear himself . . . They'd surround the bank, and Williams would see to it to kill him. Williams, hell! Deuce slowed. There were eight men in there now.

He jarred to a stop, hopped the counter and ran along the shelves to the pile of junk he hadn't been able to sell. Rats had gnawed at the dynamite and the coil of black fuse beside the box. He rummaged in the litter of other junk, found five caps and a broken pair of blower's pliers.

He heard the shouts of men in back, the bump and jar of bodies as they smashed at the back door. His hands trembling with haste, he snipped off five lengths of fuse, set the caps and bit them on tight.

The dynamite was old and dried out, as temperamental as an arthritic judge. With a prayer, he shoved the spike-handle of the pliers into the sticks and planted the capped fuses in the holes.

A shot crashed in the back. They'd shot out the lock. In half a minute they'd have the store, and would block off the front door. He stuffed the dynamite into his mackinaw pocket, grabbed the rifle and ran out the front door.

OUTSIDE, the falling snow obscured the running figures of men aroused by the shots. The lights of the saloon sent a dim flood over the snow. He forced himself down to a walk and made for the bank, two blocks away. As soon as he was out of the light, he broke into a run, cocking the rifle.

The bank was dark, but he knew they'd have a watch. He ran brazenly toward it. There was nothing to do but storm them.

"Williams!" a voice called to him from the alley beside the building. He stopped short. It was Moose.

"Come on back," Moose said from the shadow. Deuce walked toward him. They wouldn't have planned to kill Williams in the street. He was safe until he got inside, providing Moose didn't recognize him. But he had nothing to gain by waiting.

"Put up your hands, Moose. I haven't got time—"

"Deuce! Why you—"

Moose's gun rose and blasted as he dodged, pulling the rifle trigger. Moose yelled, falling backward. Deuce charged on in, crow-barring his head with the rifle-butt. Moose lay still.

Inside the bank feet pounded. He knelt in the shade, fumbled out a match, struck it and held it to the fuse. He was a sitting duck for anybody inside the bank.

Glass crashed out of a window. "It's Deuce!" somebody shouted. The fuse caught, spurting blue, then dying to a red coal. A pistol drew down on him from above. He rose and hurled the smoking stick through the window, diving against the building as the pistol crashed. He reached for another match.

Inside, voices rose in panic. He lighted another fuse, rose and hurled it through the hole just as the first one exploded with a roar. Pandemonium broke loose inside.

Down the street a crowd surged up the alley into the light from the saloon and headed toward him at a run.

Inside, feet stampeded for the rear of the bank. The second stick blew. Sticks of wood shot through the windows, taking the glass with them as the walls shook.

He ran down the alley, reaching for another match, cut around the corner and

covered the rear door. The third sputtered into fierce life as the door burst outward. He fired a shot into the panic-jammed bodies and hurled the stick under their feet. Three shots spat orange at him, a red-hot iron jumped through his thigh. He pumped lead through the door.

The stick blew. The gang turned and fled back into the bank, leaving two men lying in the doorway. A third broke out and ran across the yard. He snapped a shot at him, flipping him on his face, and charged the door, dropping the rifle and drawing a sixgun.

He knelt beside the door and lit another stick. "Come out, Perch. Surrender!"

Perch's voice shrilled at him from the dark. "Come and get us!" Shots blasted the dark and bullets whipped past him.

"I'll get you," Deuce said, and hurled the stick at the two muzzle-blasts which were closest together, waited a second, and charged through as the dynamite shattered the dark. In the flash he glimpsed Perch, standing alone in the wreckage of the bank, his men strewn about him. Perch fired at him as dark blinded them again.

They panted in silence. Outside, the roar of the mob surrounded the bank.

"Give up!" Deuce said, holding his hand in front of his mouth to confuse the location of his voice. "I need a witness to hang Williams. I'll help you out in court."

Farrell's deep voice silenced the crowd outside. "Surrender, Deuce Logan, or we'll sieve the place! I've got fifty guns against your one!"

Perch's panting stopped as he swallowed and broke out again. "Hang him yerself, if you can, and to hell with you. I'll die shooting!"

Williams's voice rose in a scream. "Fire on them! Kill them!"

A SUDDEN roar of guns burst upon the building, lead screamed through the dark as Deuce dove for the floor. He heard Perch scream. He hugged the boards as the rain of lead continued in a hell-driven hail of death. Bullets *spanged* off Williams's safe, looming black to his right.

Gradually the firing dwindled and Farrell's voice rose above the angry hum of the crowd, trying to silence it.

Deuce got to his feet as silently as possible and set his shoulder against the safe, straining to move it. Slowly it gave, rolling ponderously across the floor. Farrell was succeeding in getting silence.

Deuce felt around on the floor where the safe had rested.

"If there's anyone alive in there," Farrell called, "come out quiet now. We're coming in. Light those torches, Williams."

Despair rose in Deuce's heart as he fumbled for some kind of trapdoor in the floor. Suppose it had been a lie?

Then light glowed outside, flooding through the windows. With a leap of exultation, he saw the trapdoor, about two feet square, and digging his fingernails into the edges, yanked it up. In the reflected light of the flaring torches he made out stacks of bills and sacks of gold dust, filling a big sheet-iron box. He pulled out a sack and read the label. It bore Boglin's name, and a date of shipment two months old.

The front door flew open and men crowded beyond it in the torchlight. Two men shoved in, stood listening warily, holding their guns ready.

"They must be dead," Farrell said in a low voice.

"They may be playing possum," Williams answered. "Logan is as treacherous as a fox. Let me go first. I'll find out."

"You're a brave man, Williams," Farrell said. "But it's my duty."

Deuce sat back against the wall, holding his gun cocked, invisible on the floor beside him. His arm felt like a solid bar of hot lead.

The sheriff advanced from the door, a torch flaring and billowing black smoke above his head, throwing a savage red gleam over the litter of dynamited fixtures and sprawling bodies.

He advanced slowly toward Deuce. Suddenly his eye caught him, and his gun came up.

"Here's your gang, Farrell," Deuce said with a faint smile.

"Don't try to pretend you were trying to catch this outfit, Logan," Farrell said fiercely. "You were helping to rob this bank."

"Then who dynamited them? Who blew them up?"

"You weren't dynamiting them, Logan, and quit trying to lie out of it. You were dynamiting the safe. And that proves you were in on it, because you're the only one

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with dynamite handy. It's got to be you."

Deuce smiled slowly. "That's right, Sheriff. All except one thing. The safe isn't blown."

Farrell looked blankly at the big black box. "That's right." He looked back at Deuce. "Then you really did fight it out with them?" He thought a moment. Then he slowly holstered his gun. "I thought you—Williams said—Why?"

Williams came up behind Farrell. His face stiffened with shock at the sight of Deuce, sitting alive by the opened trapdoor. Deuce saw his hand flash toward his gun, and raised his own, covering the two. Farrell's jaw clamped shut. "So it was a trick. You can't get away with this damn thing, Logan."

"Raise your hands, Williams," Deuce commanded. "Sheriff, he's the one you really want. Delia told you the truth about the whole thing."

"Put up that gun, Logan," Farrell said sternly.

"I will if you'll listen to me instead of that buzzard beside you. He's just a damned no-account liar!"

"Go ahead."

DEUCE let down the hammer of his gun and laid it beside him. "That story Delia told you is true. Williams has been running the gang. All the money and gold he was supposed to send out for the miners around here he kept for himself, and made it look as though he was being robbed. You come here and look in this box, Farrell. It's all here, hidden. It's proven by the tags on the gold."

Farrell looked at Williams. "Is this true?" he asked.

"Watch him, Farrell," Deuce said. "Watch him good!"

"It's a lie, Farrell," Williams said casually. "That money is my bank reserve. Go look at it."

Before Deuce could cry a warning, Farrell turned his back on Williams and Williams's hands flashed up full of gun. That just about did it.

"Now, both of you," Williams said, his face gleaming pale in the red glare of light, "shut up and keep still. One peep, and you'll get it. Logan, get away from that hole and shut the door."

"You see his plan, Farrell," Deuce said quietly. "First hide the evidence, so when they come in, they won't see it. Then kill us both, and tell them I killed you, and he killed me. Neat."

"Get a move on!" Williams snarled, his teeth showing.

Deuce rolled to a kneeling position, slammed the door shut, and stood up beside Farrell, his hands raised.

Williams's eyes glittered in the light. "Yes, it's true, Farrell. I'm sorry you had to know, on account of Delia. But it can't be helped." The muzzle of his guns trained upward slightly and his hands tightened slowly.

With his upraised hand, Deuce grabbed Farrell's torch, threw himself against him, knocking him down, and as Williams's guns crashed, hurled the flaming brand square into Williams's face.

Williams screamed. His guns blasted wildly. Deuce ducked and drove in low, lifting Williams by the knees and driving him backward against the wall with a crash. A gun barrell smashed across his head, blackness flooded his brain for a moment. He threw himself on top of Williams, seizing his wrists and pinning him to the floor. Williams struggled to turn the guns on him, writhing as diabolical fury twisted his face.

Deuce lowered his head and with a lunge rammed it into Williams's jaw, twisting his neck. Pain relaxed his hold on the guns and with a wrench Deuce shook them out of his fingers.

He dragged Williams up to his feet and stood holding his wrists in the eerie flicker of the fire Sheriff Farrell was trying to put out.

"This is for plenty, Williams," Deuce said, his tense voice grating with the pent-up anger of months. "For killing and robbing; for damn near killing my brother; for trying to ruin me, and all the other things you've done." He dropped Williams' wrist. He lunged with his right. His fist caught Williams square in the face, doubling him backward. Williams kneeled, fell over sideways, and lay limp.

As the crowd streamed in, talking and questioning, Farrell rose from the dead fire and came over to Deuce. He laid a hand on his arm.

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"You came to this town and hung up your guns to lead an honest life, son. I want you to put 'em back on—keep 'em on—and work for me. I was a fool to mistrust you, and I want to make it up as much as I can."

Deuce looked at him, and an immense weariness came over him. "How about Delia?" he asked.

"What about me?" a small voice said beside him.

He looked around and down, and as he saw her eyes, the weariness had gone out of them for good.

Farrell looked at her and grinned. "She's been a better judge of men than me for a long time, I guess, Deuce. Go ahead and take her."

"All right, Sheriff. One more thing. As a future husband, I don't want your job. I'm going to start my business again. But I've got a good candidate. My brother Lew."

Farrell's face hardened. He looked at Deuce a long moment.

"He surrendered honestly," Deuce pushed on. It was really him that broke up Williams's gang. I only did the work."

"He's a gunman, Deuce."

"So am I. So are you. So put a star on him and make him an honest gunman. It's happened before."

Farrell suddenly smiled. "All right. You did it. Maybe he can too."

Deuce took Delia's arm and drew her away. "I'll go tell him," he said, and left Farrell tying Williams's arms behind his back.

Outside, the snow had stopped. The sky was a smooth black velvet sprinkled with diamonds. They stood together looking at the smooth, clean blanket of fresh-fallen snow.

"Lew's all right," she said. "I left him sleeping like a baby. And I'm kind of glad, Deuce," she added, looking up at him with a smile, "that you kept that promise to take care of him."

He looked up at the sky, and squeezed her to him. "So am I. I took care of him, and that's all through." He turned her toward him and lifted her chin. "I'm in the clear now, darling. From now on, I just take care of you."

THE END

*(Continued from page 112)*

The next forenoon, north of the Lost Man country, they sighted the trail dust of the posse.

When they galloped up, Dewlap, Wattles and the Hairpin Kid eyed the sheriff warily, but the grimness left the grizzled features as he listened to the story of the fight at the Lazy Cross line shack.

"If you had done nothin' more than clear the name of Luther Tuttle," said Jake Stoll, "it would be worth the hell you have raised." He eyed Dewlap and Wattles dubiously. "But if you two old bats wa'n't ridin' for the Lazy Cross I'd still run you out of the country."

Amos Riskin, fingering his bruised jaw, traded a frown for a smile. "A pair of rugged individuals," he said, and removed the bracelets from the wrists of the two old sin-twisters, eliminating the final stigma attached to the Texas hellions.

"No hard feelin', Shorty?" asked the grizzled Dewlap.

"None," said Amos Riskin. "And I shall cherish the memory of that little affair in Spanish Bend until I die. It was certainly something to live through!"

"Shorely," grumped Wattles. "Yuh was hellin' 'round with a ole buzzard thet kin hold more whiskey without spillin' than any man in Texas."

The Hairpin Kid's blue eyes were a-dance. He was thinking about Ma and Luther and old Sad Sam, back at the Lazy Cross, and the two thousand dollars that would be added to the money coming in for the beef shipment when the work was done in the fall.

THE END

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*(Continued from page 113)*

according to Paul H. Raymond of San Diego, California. Paul's note follows:

Dear Strawboss:

A pair of characters called Longhair Owen and Rattlesnake Fallon rased holy hell in Reed's Fort, Montana, one day in the summer of 1884. Long regarded as top-hand rustlers by the citizens of the Fort, Longhair and Rattlesnake this day roared into town, threw away their money on whiskey and thus got stinking drunk. Then, outside the saloon, they picked on a harmless townsman and beat and gun-whipped him to within an inch of his life. This was too much for the local people. Down came Winchester rifles from wall pegs; a mob went after Owen and Fallon. Fallon stood a good chance of getting away, but turning in his saddle and seeing his side-partner stagger and fall, he came back into the thick of the flying slugs to try to help him. Together they fought on until, riddled with bullets, together they died. As the townsmen stood around looking down at the bodies—which lay directly in front of Reed's Fort's only photographic shop—the store's door opened and the owner stepped out with his accordion-shaped picture-taker. He took pictures of the dead men from all angles—and later sold them to the curious at five bucks per.

*Cost of Living*

The price of vittles today and yesterday is pointed up in a note from Harry Stamford, of Eugene, Oregon.

Dear Strawboss:

When gold was discovered along the upper part of Emigrant Gulch, Montana, in 1864, prospectors, gamblers and plain suckers flocked in from all parts of the west to build up what was called Yellowstone City. During the first winter of the strike, supplies were so scarce that chewing tobacco cost five dollars a pound; a ninety-six-pound sack of flour was priced at twenty-eight dollars and you could buy tea for two bucks a pound.

More mail in the August issue, *amigos!* So long!

—STRAWBOSS.

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